

## PALM LITERATURE

**FIELD GUIDE TO THE PALMS OF MADAGASCAR.** John Dransfield, Henk Beentje, Adam Britt, Tianjanahary Ranarivelo, and Jérémie Razafitsalama. Kew Publishing, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 3AB, UK. 2006. ISBN 978 1 84246 157 0. Price \$45.75. Paper. Pp. 172.

**FIELD GUIDE TO THE PALMS OF NEW GUINEA.** William Baker and John Dransfield. Kew Publishing, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 3AB, UK. 2006. ISBN 1 84246 138 9. Price \$36.60. Paper. Pp. 108.

*The Palms of Madagascar*, by John Dransfield and Henk Beentje, was published in 1995. Despite its color illustrations and maps, the work was a technical monograph on the palms of the island, and a weighty one at that. Now the authors, together with three other colleagues, have produced a distilled version: *Field Guide to the Palms of Madagascar*.

The *Guide* begins with a very nice illustrated glossary, followed by an illustrated key to the genera, followed by species descriptions for each genus. The generic treatments start rather abruptly, with the key and without any introductory information. So, for example, to know how many species of *Dypsis* there are in Madagascar, one would either have to refer to the original *Palms of Madagascar*, or to count all 140 of them in the index of scientific names. The species descriptions, with one or two pages per species, are very attractively laid out. For each species, the page contains the Latin name, Malagasy name, key characters of the species, uses, conservation status, habitat and a short, non-technical description. Almost all species are illustrated by beautiful color images. Finally there is a section on similar species.

From my brief test of the keys, they appeared to work very well. It is, of course, difficult to construct a key to a large genus such as *Dypsis*, but the authors appear to have succeeded. However, I think it too much to expect the user of a field guide to count the stamens, let alone to see if they are opposite the sepals or petals!

I was struck by several things as I looked through this book – the extraordinary diversity in leaf and inflorescence form in *Dypsis*, as if the genus had tried out every conceivable variation known in other palms (there are even aquatic *Dypsis* and climbing *Dypsis*!). However, one's wonder at such diversity is tempered by

the fact that so many of these species are endangered in their native habitats.

I have few criticisms of this fine book. The maps are rather dark and the dots rather big – I think the maps in *The Palms of Madagascar* worked better. The small sketches given for each species, showing characters of stems, leaves and inflorescences, are in some cases misleading (showing, for example, aerial stems for species that may be acaulescent) and are probably superfluous, given the descriptions. For *Dypsis*, 77 species are treated with full-page spreads, but the remaining 63 species are only referred to in the “similar species” sections.

I have long been a fan of field guides, and this volume is a model – scientifically accurate but presented in an accessible and attractive format. I feel sure that IPS members will appreciate this guide. There is also a Malagasy language version.

This New Guinea guide has exactly the same format as the *Field Guide to the Palms of Madagascar*, but this is a guide to the 31 genera of palms found in New Guinea. For this reason I feel the Guide is somewhat misleadingly entitled (especially compared to *Field Guide to the Palms of Madagascar*) and should have been entitled *A Field Guide to the Genera of New Guinea Palms*.

The book has a more extensive introduction than in *Field Guide to the Palms of Madagascar*. There are notes on New Guinea and its palm flora, plants that look like palms, how to collect palm specimens, and where to see palms in New Guinea. There is also an illustrated glossary. The keys are rather different than the dichotomous keys of *Field Guide to the Palms of Madagascar*, although this format will work only when there are few taxa to key out, as is the case here.

The descriptions of each genus are laid out in a very similar way as the Madagascar guide: Latin name, key characters, notes on distribution, habitat, number of species, habit and description. The distribution of the genus in New Guinea is given by a shaded map. For the larger genera, several color images, again very beautiful, of various species are given. There is also an Indonesian language version.

There have been at least three previous works on the New Guinea palms, and I still do not think we are quite there yet!

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