

## PALM LITERATURE

**PALMS OF SOUTHERN ASIA.** Andrew Henderson, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford. 2009. ISBN978-0-691-13449-9. US\$53. Hardback. 199 pp.



Henderson admits that he originally had a field guide to all Old World palms in mind. Realizing that such a task was too big for a single volume, he decided instead to cover Southern Asia defined as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam.

*Palms of Southern Asia* summarizes all existing knowledge on the 352 species and 43 genera recorded in the region. The coconut is included, whereas the similarly widespread African oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) and sago palm (*Metroxylon sagu*) are excluded for reasons that are not evident. The language style is straightforward and will undoubtedly appeal to a wider audience than just palm specialists.

In the introduction, Henderson presents a number of "Palm Regions" within South Asia. The morphology of palms is briefly treated accompanied by a limited number of line drawings. The definition of dioecy in the calamoid palms is over simplified since *functional* female inflorescences of rattans often contain two kinds of flowers: a female flower and a sterile male flower. A dichotomous key to the palm genera is provided.

The remaining part of the book is devoted to description of palm diversity in Southern Asia. The genera are treated systematically and in alphabetical order. Each of them is introduced with what is basically a non-technical version of the descriptions in *Genera Palmarum*, followed by notes on etymology, ecology, uses and distribution. Keys to species are given for all genera with two or more species. Henderson has put great effort into basing the keys on easily recognizable characters, a task that becomes increasingly difficult as the number of species in the genus rises. Keys are partitioned by geographic regions in the case of large genera such as *Calamus*. Using both geographic distribution and morphology as characters may lead to misconceptions about variation. In the case of *Licuala peltata*, for example, one cannot help wondering whether populations in Bangladesh, Bhutan and

northeastern India are solitary or not, since they key out separately.

Common names, taken from monographs, floras and herbarium specimens, are listed after the Latin name. Henderson points out that these by no means cover the multiplicity of names given to the same palm throughout its distributional range. True, but in Thailand a comprehensive dictionary of plant names already exists (Smitinand 2001) that apparently was not consulted by the author.

The species descriptions are short and based on features that are easily recognizable in the field. For some of the more speciose genera, such as *Pinanga*, they tend to be a bit repetitive when for each species we learn that the crown shaft is yellowish green. This character is actually quite variable feature in the genus, and in *P. perakensis*, for example, it is often orange to reddish-brown. Dot maps are given for all species except cultivated ones. They are based on information from more than 4400 specimens. In a few cases, sight records are included, as well as "records from reliable monographs and floras." A different symbol should have been used for these records since their identity cannot be verified. Unfortunately Henderson missed an opportunity to assign conservation status to the species. Some of the taxonomic decisions can be challenged, as is always the case. I would like to blow my own trumpet for keeping *Livistona speciosa* separate from *L. jenkinsiana*, instead of lumping the two under *L. jenkinsiana*.

A total of 256, beautifully rendered color photographs accompany the text. The list of references is by no means exhaustive but gives some of the key references for the classification. In the appendix, species checklists are given for individual countries or region, which is useful for fieldwork.

With *Palms of Southern Asia* professional and amateur palm lovers alike have a unique tool to unravel and understand the diversity of southern Asian palms. No doubt it will soon become a standard source of information on palms, and as such it can be highly recommended to all IPS members.

## LITERATURE CITED

- SMITINAND, T. 2001. Thai Plant Names (rev. ed.). The Royal Forest Department, Bangkok, Thailand.

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