

## Notes on the Distribution of *Bentinckia condapanna* on the Palni Hills in Peninsular India

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*Bentinckia condapanna* A. Berry has been known as endemic to the Kalakkad forests (Western Ghats) in the extreme south of peninsular India (Fig. 1). The population in the type locality itself is now restricted to sheltered pockets, often to crevices of steep rocks, inaccessible to elephants and humans, both of whom relish the delicious terminal bud!

The present report refers to the occurrence of the species on the Palni (Pulney) Hills (Fig. 1), an eastward spur of the same Western Ghats, about 200 km to the north of the type locality. The palm is so exclusively associated with the Kalakkad forests that even in cultivation its identity goes unrecognized, as happened in the present case. A row of palms at The Anglade Institute of Natural History, Shembaganur, Kodaikanal, on the Palni Hills (Fig. 2) was taken for another "unknown palm" until a comprehensive collection (RHT 53232a, b, c, d, e, f, & g) was checked at Kew against the type, assisted by Dr. J. Dransfield, and found to be identical.

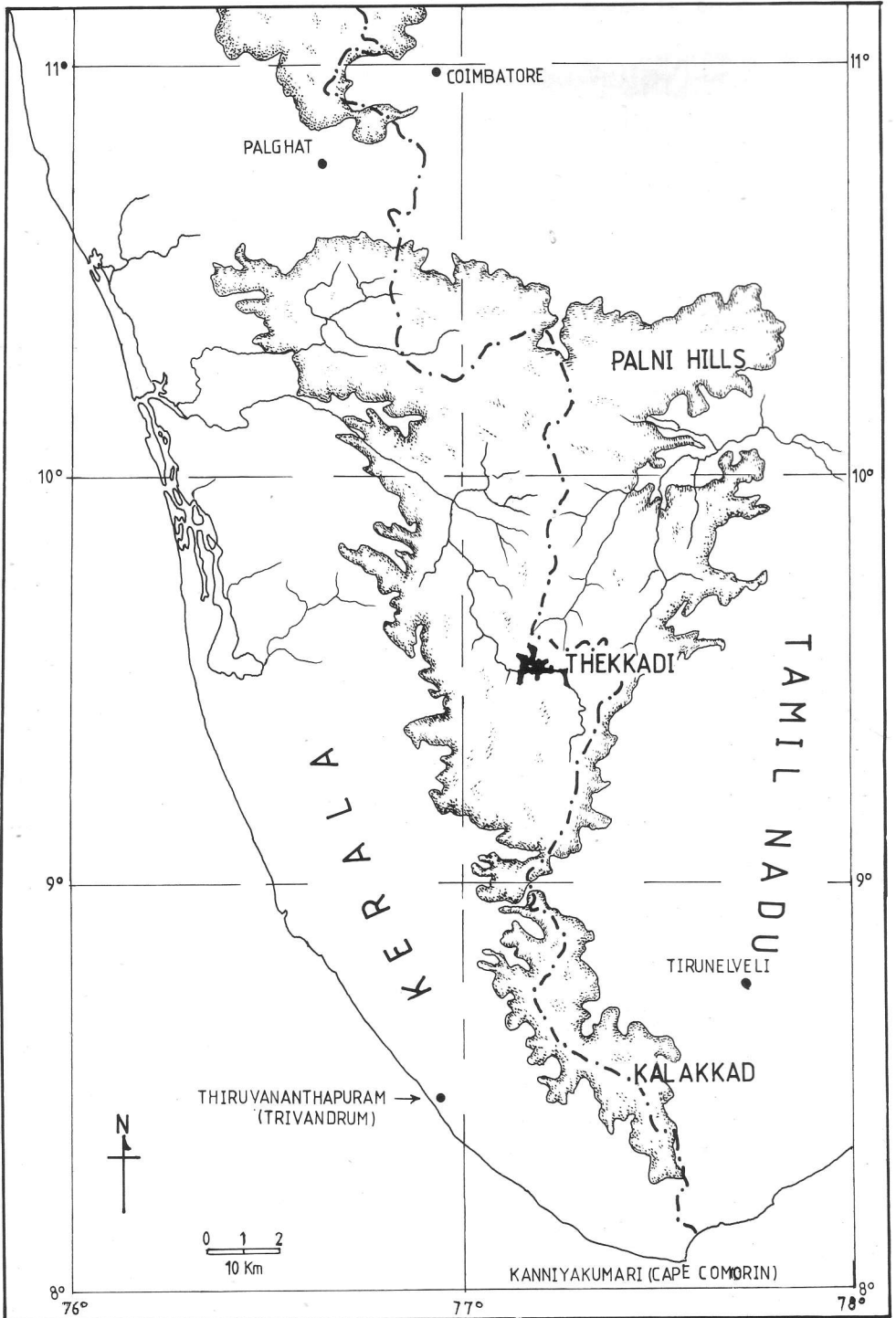
This identification made me re-examine my previous collections and field notes which information is the matter of this note. The species does occur sporadically in the precipitous ravines on the slopes of the Palni Hills. It is locally called "wild Areca." Though it has no specific use, its populations must have suffered from large scale habitat destruction. Consequently, its present pattern of occurrence: isolated trees left in totally unapproachable ravines. For

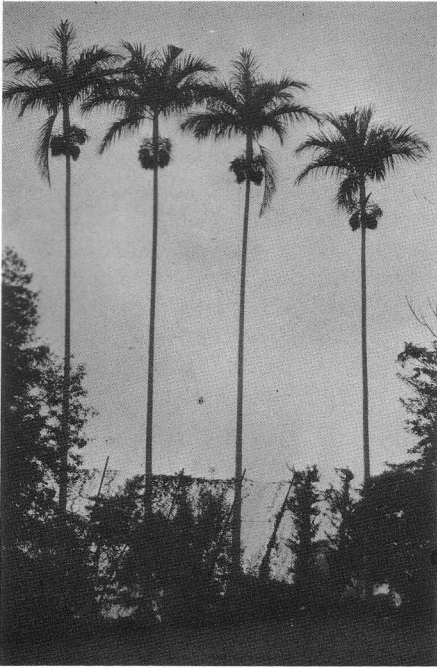
instance RHT 52764 (vegetative materials only) and RHT 54097a, b, c, d, & e (fruiting materials) were collected from localities where only two specimens each were left.

The extension of the distribution of this endemic species is interesting indeed, but the story does not end here. The occurrence here of three other species associated with the evergreen belt of the Western Ghats is noteworthy: (1) *Arenga wightii* Griffith (RHT 44813 & 49985); (2) *Artocarpus hirsutus* Lam. (RHT 42210, 44814, 48729 & 49987); and (3) *Cycas circinalis* L. (RHT 42103, 44308, 45022, 46688 (♀), 46696, 48614 (♂), 48698 (♂), 52589 (♂) & 52591 (♀)—(flowering and fruiting materials are specifically marked).

The following observations are in order:

1. The occurrence of these three species (of the evergreen belt of the Western Ghats with two monsoons a year, while the Palnis in the rainshadow region of the Ghats with only one monsoon), seems to suggest that the Palnis in the past had a more moist climate.
2. The occurrence of *Bentinckia condapanna* along with the above species seems to reinforce this conclusion.
3. If so, these surviving specimens now occurring in the least accessible places (especially unsuitable for human habitation or cultivation) are absolutely the last sentinels of a long bygone age.





2. *Bentinckia condapanna* on the Palni Hills at the Anglade Institute of Natural History, Shembaganur, Kodaikanal.

4. A thorough search across the Western Ghats in the peninsula, at least south of the Palghat gap (see Fig. 1), to record accurately the occurrence and distribution of *Bentinckia condapanna* is in order. This could prepare for a monograph on the genus on which so little is known. The Palni members appear to be notably more robust than those in the type locality.

Specimens of the cited numbers of the species are deposited at RHT. Further information on the vegetation of the Palni Hills may be had from the author's *A Handbook of the Anglade Institute of Natural History* (reviewed in *Kew Bull.* 44: 550-551. 1989); his definitive illustrated *Flora of the Palni Hills* is due for 1992.

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1. Map showing the location of the Kalakkad forests and the Palni Hills where *Bentinckia condapanna* is found.