

## Canyon Tajo

BILL GUNTHER

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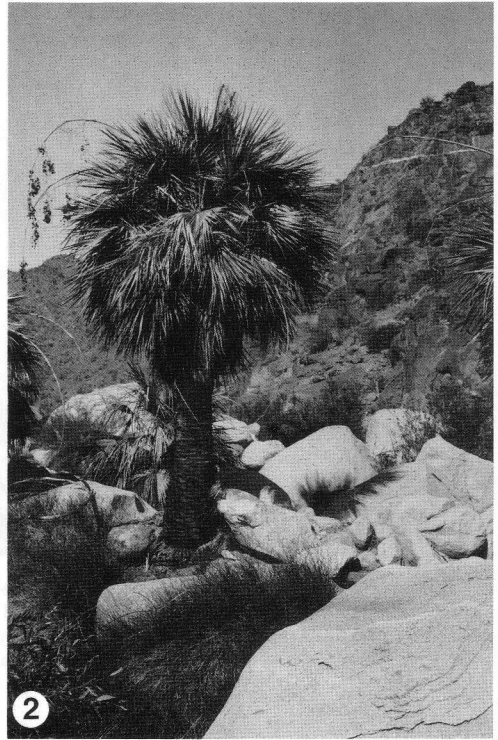
Very few living persons have seen what is probably the largest concentration of native palms in Mexico. Very certainly it is the largest concentration of native palms in the Mexican State of Baja California. These palms are beautiful; there are about 10,000 of them, and they are flourishing in a strikingly spectacular setting. The reason why few modern-day people have seen them is that with time this huge collection of palms is becoming progressively less and less accessible.

These palms are of the species *Washington filifera* and *Brahea armata*. They grow in Canyon Tajo, the largest and by far the most spectacular of the gorges which cut into the eastern slope of the Sierra de Juarez mountain range. The source of this canyon is about 5,000 feet above sea level, a few miles northeast of Mexico's isolated Constitution National Park, which itself can be reached only via sand ruts and only during dry weather. Dominating the head of Canyon El Tajo is a huge block of granite rock called the Cantilla; from the top of the cantilla one can throw a stone and it will fall 3,000 feet before landing in Canyon El Tajo. From the two sides of the cantilla, to its base, run two very steep canyons; their creeks join at its base and then continue their descent through the twisting, rock strewn, and palm-lined Canyon Tajo. At the mouth of the canyon, about nine miles to the east, the stream disappears into the relatively flat desert sand which surrounds Laguna Salada, an isolated salty lake which lies below sea level. At times Laguna Salada is larger than California's famous Salton Sea, but now,

due to a five-year drought, Laguna Salada is dry.

From thousands of years ago until about two hundred and fifty years ago this area of Baja California was populated by the Pai Pai tribe of Indians. Thousands of Pai Pai Indians used Canyon El Tajo as their main route of transit from their summer homes, in the pinyon pine forests surrounding Lake Hansen in the present Constitution National Park, to their winter homes, which were located in places where water was available along the lower desert edge of the Sierra Juarez mountains. During their twice a year transit through the canyon, they stopped and visited with others of their tribe who lived continuously in Canyon Tajo.

Living there was good: the palms provided edible seeds, shade, and beams and thatch for their homes; the oaks provided acorns; the stream provided water. Deer, mountain goats, rabbits, and quail provided fresh meat, feathers, and blankets. To members of the Pai Pai Indian Tribe, Canyon Tajo seemed to be the center of the universe—until the arrival of Spanish soldiers and missionaries. The Spaniards brought with them the germs of smallpox and syphilis, to which the Spaniards had some resistance, but to which the isolated Indians were very vulnerable. As a result, the Pai Pai Indians were exterminated, and Canyon Tajo became unpopulated by human beings. It has remained unpopulated to this day. But here and there, through its reaches, shards of Indian pottery, and grinding holes in the granite rock, remain. Also remaining are sections of the



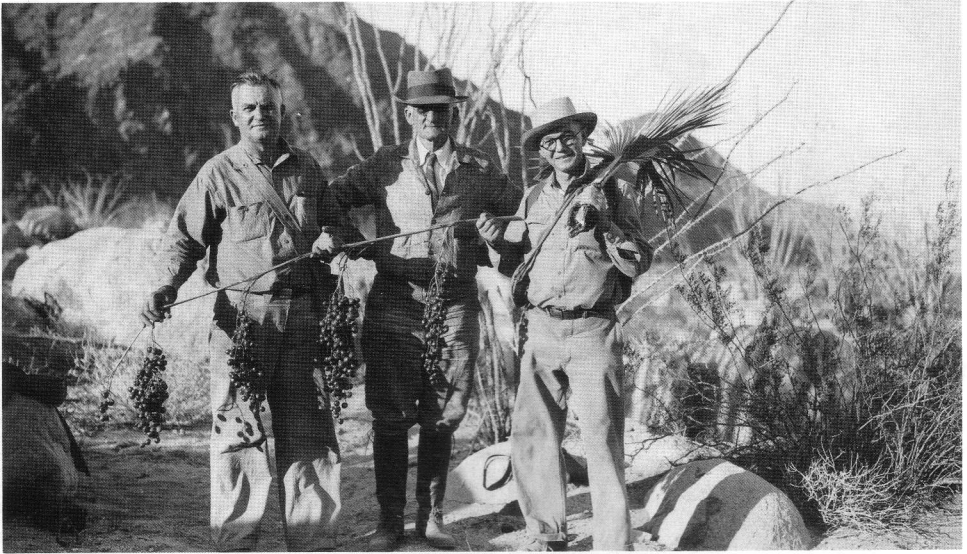
1. This photo, by Carl Epling, 1942, is from the Cornell University files and titled "*Washingtonia filifera*, Baja California." But are these three palms really all of the same species, or are the two slimmer and taller specimens on the right *Washingtonia robusta*? This question, first posed by Randall Henderson in the *Desert Magazine* 55 years ago is still unanswered. 2. This photo, taken by Randall Henderson in Canyon Tajo in 1936, is titled "*Erythea armata*" (= *Brahea armata*).

wide footpath between the desert and the highlands, through Canyon Tajo, which once was the well traveled Indian equivalent to one of our modern superhighways. Fragments of this old footpath still remain clearly defined and just as easily passable by foot as ever. But during the last 250 years there have been periodic *chubascos*, or hurricanes, the floodwaters of which have gouged out the rock and the earth, completely eliminating most of the old Indian path. Every *chubasco* which strikes the area does its share to make Canyon Tajo less accessible.

Until 55 years ago, it was still possible, with a Model T Ford, during years when Laguna Salada was dry, to drive from the dry bed of that lake up to the outlet of the

old Indian trail and then up that trail to within a short walk to the lowest grove of palms. That is exactly what Randall Henderson did. Henderson was a desert enthusiast and a palm enthusiast; he was also founder and editor of the *Desert Magazine* (Fig. 1). In that magazine he wrote about Canyon Tajo, telling of its thousands of palms, and about how some of the palms were not of the then already well known genus *Washingtonia*, but rather apparently of a different genus, with a blue grey leaf color and much larger seeds (Fig. 2).

To this day, no one knows exactly how Henderson's article reached Dr. Liberty Hyde Bailey, of Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York, who then was the world's authority on palms. But somehow, it did.



3. This historic photo from the Cornell University files is titled "Tajo 1936." It shows Dr. Liberty Hyde Bailey (center), then age 78, with two companions, on April 17, 1936, in Canyon Tajo, Baja California, Mexico, holding the seeds and leaves of *Brahea armata*. Note that Bailey, even in the desert, observed the then tradition that gentlemen should always wear a formal hat, jacket, and tie.

And Bailey was very interested. He was so interested that even at his age of 78 he wrote to Henderson saying that he would like to visit Canyon Tajo, under Henderson's guidance, to see personally and evaluate the palms. Henderson was flattered that a scientist of the stature of Liberty Hyde Bailey should write to him, but at the same time he was worried to think about any person of 78 years of age visiting Tajo canyon. So he replied with a note about the tribulations of getting to Canyon Tajo and thereafter hiking to the palms.

In response to Henderson's very cautious note, Bailey asked for a date to go. Henderson proposed a date, Bailey unhesitatingly accepted, and the trip was scheduled for April 17, 1936.

By all records of Bailey, and also of Henderson, that trip was eminently successful. Henderson's Model T Ford took them so close to the palms that with only seven hours of total time away from the car, Bailey had inspected, photographed, and gathered specimens from both of the

palm genera in Canyon Tajo. As shown in one of the accompanying photos (Fig. 3), taken in Canyon Tajo that date, Bailey, alone among those present, maintained the decorum of that day—which prescribed that gentlemen should not appear in public without a coat and tie. In the next day's *Calexico Chronicle*, Henderson wrote that "It was a strenuous trip, even for a desert rat. But the doctor (Bailey) took it all in fine humor—and entertained us along the entire route with stories and experiences and scientific comment which would have been a delight to any lecture audience. I am sure that his muscles were weary when he arrived back at the mouth of the canyon,—but his mind showed no trace of fatigue."

And afterwards, Bailey reported that the two palm species in Canyon Tajo were *Washingtonia filifera* and *Erythea armata*. (The genus *Erythea* has subsequently been merged with the genus *Brahea*.) Also subsequently, Bailey reduced the previously described species of *Wash-*

*ingtonia* from five to the two which now continue to be recognized.

But that happened 55 years ago.

Since 1936 two more *chubascos* have hit Canyon Tajo with very destructive force. No longer can any motor vehicle approach the lower mouth of Canyon Tajo along the route used by Henderson's Model T Ford, 55 years ago. The way is now completely blocked by gorges and by huge rocks and by trunks of dead palms and by drifts of soft sand.

Canyon Tajo, nowadays, is so isolated that contemporary road maps show no approach either to its source or to its mouth. Because the old Indian trail is now obliterated in so many places, and because neither the approach nor the lower exit are marked, the total length of the hike from the vehicle-access point nearest its source, to the nearest vehicle-access point to its mouth, nowadays amounts to an expedition. To make this trip in a leisurely

fashion, and to enjoy thoroughly the palms and the spectacular mountain and desert scenery en route, two nights of camping would be necessary. Extensive planning also would be necessary, and a guide familiar with the area should be along. Were these prerequisites met in advance, this would be a beautiful trip for palm enthusiasts. But without meeting them, it might be fatal.

So for right now, let it live only as a dream.

But if one of these years an organized trip through Canyon Tajo is announced (perhaps as an optional post-biennial trip after some future southern-California IPS Biennial Meeting), sign up very promptly for an experience which would likely provide a lifetime of vivid memories. And at but a fraction of the cost of any alternative trip.

May your dreams come true.

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