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Nannorrhops ritchiana, the Mazari Palm, in Pakistan

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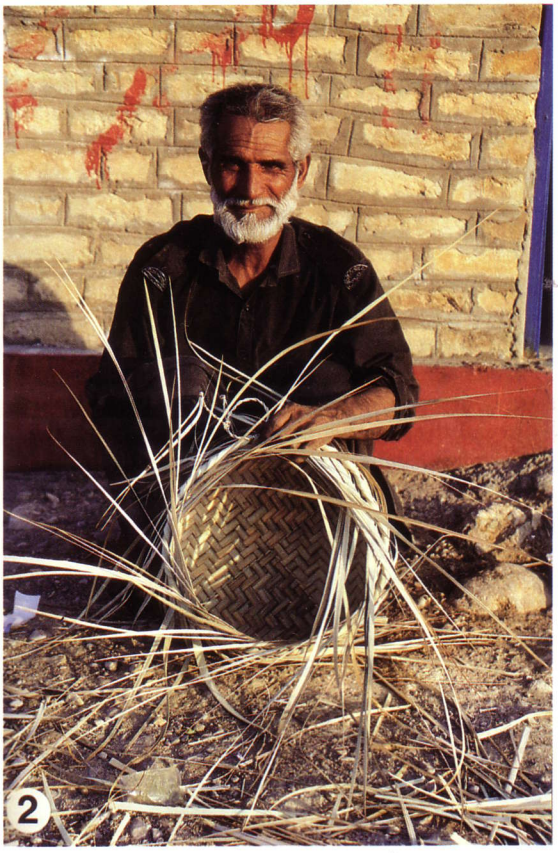
Not many people one knows would consider Pakistan a holiday destination, yet the palm enthusiast is drawn to visit strange places, not by the luxury of the swimming pool, the fancy hotel, the golf, or the scuba diving, but frequently by the strange desire to see some often obscure palm growing in its natural habitat. Thus it was that we decided to visit Pakistan to see *Nannorrhops ritchiana* in the wild.

There are many places recorded as supporting populations of *Nannorrhops* in publications by Beccari, by Blatter, and by Griffith. Indeed, the problem is not where to go but which areas to miss out of the itinerary. After careful study of the available records we made Peshawar our starting point, and arrived there in the middle of November. First on our list of places to visit was the famed Khyber Pass, about 20 miles (32 km) west of the city, which leads into Afghanistan. A permit is necessary to visit this area, and with the permit comes a guard armed with a Kalashnikov who will accompany you in your taxi to the Pass and back. All the authors recorded this palm as common in the Khyber Pass yet we saw none and returned somewhat disappointed.

The following morning we were collected by another taxi for a three day trip which would take us to many of the other locations recorded for the north of the country. We set off at 8 am and drove through Nowshera to the Indus River, thence to Nizampur, Sangina, Attock (where we were also hopeful of finding *Nannorrhops*, but were again disappointed) and Pindi Gheb where we had lunch, then via Talagang to Mianwali where we spent the night. In the morning we took the Khushab road, then turned off at Quaidabad in the direction of Sakesar in the Salt Range of mountains, our first goal. The road was in quite good order and a few miles north of Amdalanwala, we began to climb until we were high above the flat plain below. The Salt Range rises straight out of the plain with very little introduction.

We climbed and climbed, the rocky and arid landscape providing stunning scenery. At an altitude of 2,600 ft (800 m), we came across our first specimens of *Nannorrhops ritchiana* in its natural habitat (Fig. 1). We had spent many hours scanning the countryside so when we finally found them, relief was as much of an emotion as excitement. They were impressive plants, bushy, some to about 6 feet (1.80 m) tall, pale blue/green in color with rather thick trunks and incredibly thick and leathery leaves. They were growing here on the steep slopes in very poor, rocky, limestone soil, together with various evergreen hard-leaved shrubs. We took some photographs and then carried on driving, passing lots more plants. When they seemed to peter out, we had the driver turn around and drive back to where they were at their best. Here we spent a happy hour or two, going from plant to plant, and just doing what palm enthusiasts do. We took some measurements, made on-the-spot field notes, cut some leaves as herbarium specimens, and just simply enjoyed being among these attractive palms.

We then drove on but before too long we were stopped at a police post and told that the area ahead was 'closed' so we had no choice but to turn around. But we really didn't mind driving past all the *Nannorrhops* again. We drove all the way back to Quaidabad and there we turned east and drove to the small town of Khushab where we decided to spend the night. We checked in at a small 'hotel' (rather dirty but very cheap) and had dinner at a 'restaurant' (likewise). In the morning we couldn't wait to leave, heading north towards Naushahra on a good, double-width road. Soon we reached the Salt Range again and began once more to climb but despite a thorough search found no trace of our palms although the habitat seemed identical to yesterday's. The scenery was just as spectacular with red rocks against the cloudless blue sky. After we descended on the far side of the mountain range, but before we reached



1. *Nannorrhops ritchiana* has blue-green leathery leaves. 2. *Nannorrhops ritchiana*. Local people make ropes and baskets from the dried leaves.

the town, we turned off east and soon found ourselves on the main road to Islamabad (Pakistan's capital city) and Rawalpindi. We drove through Nurpur and Chakwal and eventually reached Islamabad at 1 pm. It is a 'new' city having been built from scratch some 30 years ago, with good, wide roads, and lots of greenery, such a difference from other Pakistani cities.

We had the driver drop us off at a cheap hotel and bade him goodbye. That evening we went out for a rather expensive and somewhat disappointing meal at a posh hotel. Pakistan is a dry country in more than one sense of the word. Not only is it extremely arid, it is also 'dry' in the sense that you cannot buy alcohol anywhere, even in western hotels. Not only that, but the day we arrived turned out be a 'meatless' day so we had to put up with a vegetarian meal without even a glass of beer to wash it down!

The next day we caught a plane south to Quetta in Baluchistan. *Nannorrhops* was said by Blatter in 'Palms of British India' (1926) to grow 'everywhere up to 5,000 feet in Balluchistan' so we had high hopes of finding it in some quantities. From the airport we took a taxi to a hotel in town, the Qasr-e-Gul, where we asked if it were possible to rent a jeep-and-driver for three days. After a while, some wild-looking tribesmen arrived, one of whom owned such a vehicle. Some hard bargaining followed but the driver would not drop below US$150 for the three days, definitely not cheap. Reluctantly we agreed, and set off after half an hour, driving first to Urak, where we saw no sign of the promised palms, then back to Quetta and out by another route in the direction of Nakas. The reason that we wanted to go there was that in 'Blatter' there is a photograph of the railway station, surrounded by a sea of palms. If they were anywhere they would be here (Fig. 2).

After passing through more spectacular scenery

3. *Nannorrhops ritchiana* cover vast areas of the plain. 4. In the Bolan Pass, *Nannorrhops ritchiana* grows in unbelievably dry conditions.

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8. *Nannorrhops ritchiana* in Rome Botanic Garden. Note one of its several thick trunks. 9. An oasis of Date Palms, reminiscent of *Phoenix sylvestris*.

we began to see palms, first in ones and twos, then by the dozen and the hundred, covering great areas of the plain. (Fig. 3). This southern area of Pakistan is much more arid than the north of the country. The slopes of the mountains, some of which are over 10,000 feet (3,000 m) high, are mostly bare except for, in some places, a thin cover of grass. *Nannorrhops* grows up to 5,000 feet (1,500 m) mainly in the flood-plains of rivers or in small ravines and depressions in stony limestone soil, but generally in places where the water table is not too low. The only cultivated areas of land are small, irrigated fruit orchards near rivers.

None of the palms was as big as those we'd seen up north and the reason soon became clear: all of these plants had been pruned of most of their leaves. Local people make ropes and baskets from the leaves (Fig. 4) and continually cut them from the living plants. We saw hundreds of cut leaves by the roadside, awaiting collection, and camels laden with bundles containing thousands of them (Fig. 5). Blatter had described the plants as being generally about 6 feet tall, but most of those we saw were less than two feet, most with just one or two leaves left (Fig. 6). Immediately a new leaf grows, it is cut off, and as a consequence

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5. Camels, donkeys, trucks and tractors are used to carry thousands of cut *Nannorrhops* leaves to the villages. 6. Most plants of *Nannorrhops* are reduced to just one or two leaves by repeated and indiscriminate cutting. As a result, they never set seed and are much reduced in size. Ultimately they will die, as hundreds of thousands already have. 7. Nakus Railway Station as it is today, strewn with *Nannorrhops* leaves ready for loading.

the plants are getting smaller and smaller. They appear not to set seed so here was yet another example of plants doomed to extinction because of over-exploitation.

The leaves themselves are worth next to nothing. We bought a 40 ft length of rope made from *Nannorrhops* leaves for just 5 rupees ($0.15). Already one can see vast areas which have been cleared of these palms. If the leaves are continually cut, the plant will eventually die. Many of the areas described in the old literature are now quite devoid of palms and those plants that are left are, almost without exception, mutilated. The further we drove, the smaller the plants became until, when we reached Nakas (now Nakus), they were at their smallest, just a few inches tall. And still they were being harvested! The railway platform itself was strewn with the cut leaves (Fig. 7).

In the Botanic Garden in Rome, Italy, is a huge *Nannorrhops*, perhaps the biggest in the world (Fig. 8). It has several trunks, each about a foot in diameter and up to 10 or 12 feet long. It is quite sad to contemplate the fact that these poor decimated plants in Pakistan are the same species and could get just as big if they were simply left alone.

Depressed, we drove on to Hanai where we stayed the night in a poor hotel. Unfortunately, there was a general power cut in operation when we arrived and the meal, of mutton, which was served in our room, had to be eaten almost in darkness. Probably just as well. We had planned to carry on down to Sibi the following day but apparently the road was blocked so we had to go back up to Quetta again, and once more leave by a different exit. Soon we passed through the spectacular Bolan Pass on the way down to Sibi. The road is built along an arid valley with almost sheer sides, quite biblical in appearance with flocks of goats and groups of camels here and there. A railway accompanied the road—a masterpiece of engineering. Built by the British exactly a hundred years ago, in 1894, all the tunnels (and there were many) had British names: 'Mary Jane', 'Braemar', 'Windy Corner' etc.

We pressed on to Sibi and were again disappointed at not finding any more *Nannorrhops*. Perhaps they had once grown there; it certainly seemed ideal for them. We stayed there the night and the following morning set off back up the same road on the return journey. We stopped at an oasis of date palms (*Phoenix dactylifera*) around a small river (Fig. 9). They showed characteristics suggesting that they had been influenced by *P. sylvestris*, which is distributed in the more humid great plains of India to the east. The whole area was very pretty.

Then, finally, and to our surprise, we did come across more of 'our' palms that we had missed yesterday. They were growing on a steep hillside in unbelievably dry conditions, again on limestone. Perhaps they were the sole survivors of a much larger population. They were the last ones that we were to see. On our return to Quetta, we caught a plane out of this beautiful but arid country, and flew back to Europe.

We had been delighted to find *Nannorrhops* in the wild in Pakistan, but our pleasure was much diminished by sadness at the way entire populations had been wiped out, or at best drastically reduced in numbers, and those, mutilated almost beyond recognition. If you, too, would like to see *Nannorrhops* in the wild, go to Pakistan by all means, but don't leave it too long. There might soon be few left for future generations to enjoy.

1995 Board of Directors' Meeting

The International Palm Society will hold its 1995 Board Meeting on October 26–29, 1995, in the Sarasota and Tampa area of Florida. See CHAPTER NEWS AND EVENTS.