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In Search of *Thrinax ekmaniana*

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I have long been intrigued by the palms of Cuba. Virtually all the species of palms native to Cuba seem to flourish in our South Florida landscape, only 95 miles (145 km) to the north. The diverse genera that make Cuba their home include *Acoelorrhaphe*, *Acrocomia*, *Bactris*, *Calyptrotrichia*, *Coccothrinax*, *Colpothrinax*, *Copernicia*, *Gastrococos*, *Goussia*, *Prestoea*, *Pseudophoenix*, *Roystonea*, *Sabal*, and *Thrinax*.

Cuba is a much larger island than most people realize, 720 miles (1 150 km) long and averaging 50 miles (80 km) wide. It is a remnant of South America that broke off and drifted north into the Caribbean, allowing an interesting combination of South American and Caribbean flora to become established. There is a wide variety of habitats, ranging from savannas to 3000 foot (1000 m) mountains. Soils can be sand, rich clay, solid limestone, or serpentine—a cocktail of minerals which is toxic to most plants, but home to some unique palms. Rainfall varies due to mountain ranges that run through much of the land. There are sandy beaches and rocky coasts with sheer cliffs. All these factors create a land of many different habitats, each with its own group of unique species.

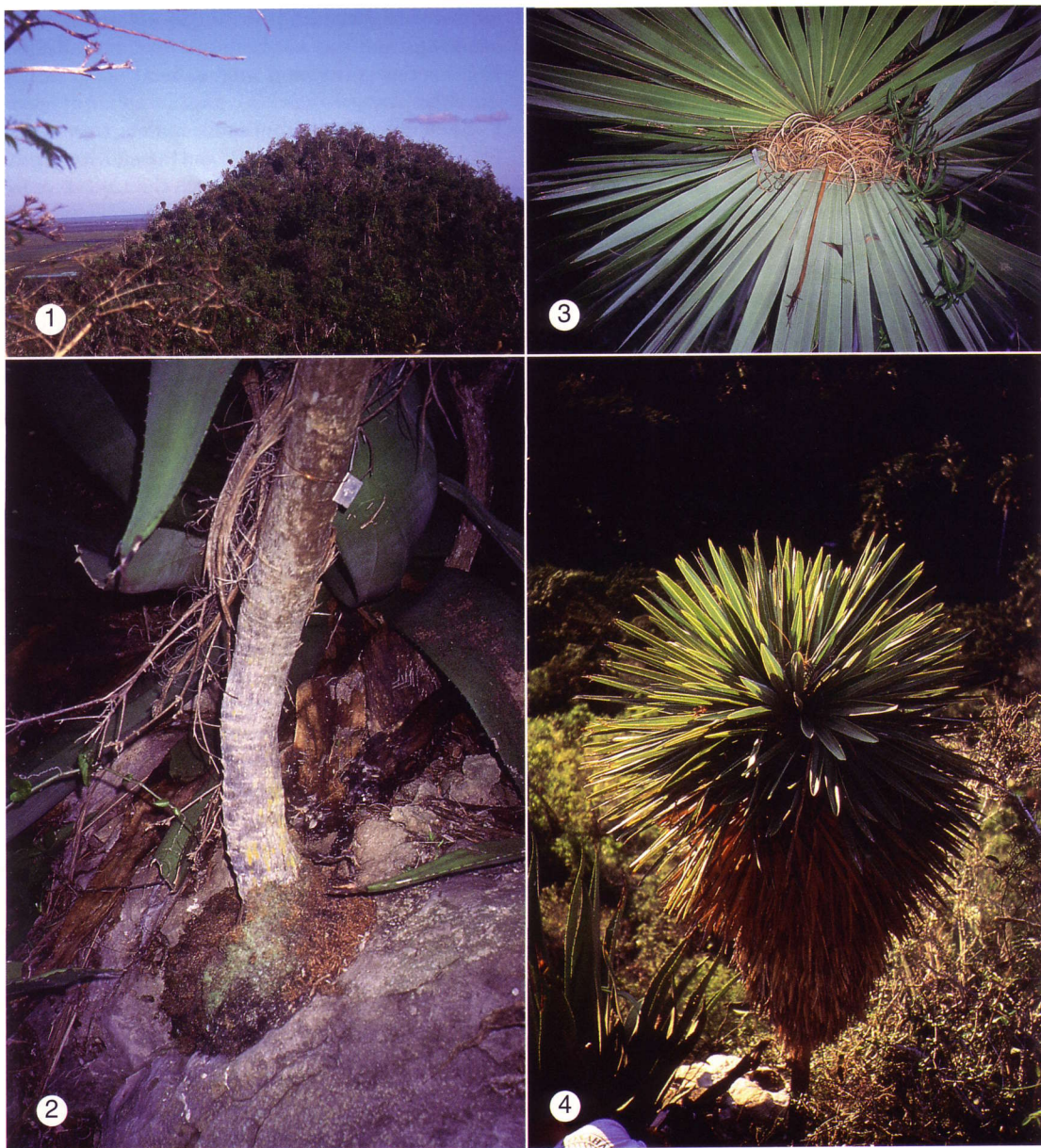
Information on the palms of Cuba is sketchy at best. One has to rely on the works of Hermano Leon, Seifriz, Borhidi, Muniz, Dahlgren, Glassman, and others; most of the papers are 35–60 years old. Some species are well-documented in these few research works, but most have not been completely described. Keys for identification, adequate descriptions of most species, and good photographs are all lacking.

Armed with the research I could find, I traveled to Cuba in the summer of 1994 with some fellow International Palm Society members to see what we could discover. It was a trip of only one week, as we did not know what to expect but wanted to get an idea of conditions on the island. We traveled mostly in western Cuba, in the province of Pinar del Rio, where we saw

Colpothrinax wrightii, *Sabal maritima*, *Goussia princeps*, *Calyptrotrichia plumeriana*, *Coccothrinax miraguama* var. *arenicola*, *Acoelorrhaphe wrightii*, *Copernicia curtissii*, and others in their natural habitats. It was an exciting trip, and we learned just how big a country Cuba is. We realized that several trips would be necessary to see all of it and to rediscover all of the palms.

I had heard of *Thrinax ekmaniana*, but had seen little reference to it, let alone a description or picture. It does not exist in any botanical garden outside of Cuba, and is not in cultivation anywhere. When it first became available in 1995, I bought a copy of Andrew Henderson et al.'s *A Field Guide to the Palms of the Americas*. While glancing through the photos, I came across the picture of *Thrinax ekmaniana* and was immediately struck by its unique beauty. I knew then that I would have to try and find this species on my next trip. The information on its location was not particularly helpful, described only as a single limestone hill or *mogote* in Las Villas, a large area in north-central Cuba. We had just been through the Los Organos mountains, a range of *mogotes* 100 miles (160 km) long, so the thought of actually locating this palm without more detailed information seemed daunting, much like finding the proverbial "needle in a haystack."

It was not until the fall of 1995 that I returned to Cuba, and although I wanted to see *T. ekmaniana*, the unlikelihood of actually finding that single *mogote* was intimidating, so I decided against spending too much time in search of it. Some fellow palm enthusiasts and I wanted to spend most of our time looking for *Copernicia baileyana* and *Copernicia fallae* to try to determine if there are any differences between these two species. I traveled through the area of where *T. ekmaniana* appeared to be on a location map some Russians had put together in the '70s, but became quickly frustrated by all the *mogotes*, and pushed on to locate the *Coperni-*



1. Limestone mogote where *Thrinax ekmaniana* lives. 2. Base of trunk of *Thrinax ekmaniana* showing the limestone rock where it grows. 3. Close-up of fiber attached to leaf petioles of *Thrinax ekmaniana*. Appears as thatch or "hair." 4. *Thrinax ekmaniana*.

cias. Although a successful trip in other regards, it confirmed that finding *T. ekmaniana* would be extremely difficult.

About eight months passed and I returned once again, determined that this was going to be the trip to locate the elusive *T. ekmaniana*. Again, three of us started out from Havana very

early one morning, heading east along the north coast, quickly passing the areas we had previously checked out. We crisscrossed new terrain over rough dirt roads, trying to catch a glimpse of the palm on a distant hill. We passed other interesting species but kept on, determined to find *T. ekmaniana*.

The morning passed, and the roads seemed to develop larger and larger potholes that made driving at times a nightmare. We found a hotel out in the middle of nowhere, and had the best beans and rice ever. Feeling renewed, we bounced down the road further, straining our eyes to see the elusive *Thrinax ekmaniana*. The mogotes became smaller and fewer in number. By mid-afternoon, we had come upon a flat plain with no hills to be seen in any direction. We had long passed the area pinpointed on the map as the location for *T. ekmaniana*. The main road had taken us inland, so we scouted dirt paths out toward the coast to see if there were any hills there.

The afternoon waned, but the landscape had not changed. Everywhere it was flat. It was beginning to get late, and we still had a long way to go to get to our hotel for the night. We were quite disappointed, assuming we had somehow missed that single mogote. The sun was beginning to cast long shadows, so we went faster to reach the hotel before dark.

One thing we had learned about traveling in Cuba was not to travel at night. There are too many bicycles, horse-drawn carriages, and vehicles with no lights, as well as people walking on the road. Cows often decide the road is a good place to sleep; there are always vehicles parked there and, of course, absolutely no street lights. This obstacle course is hard enough to navigate during the day, let alone in the dark.

We were resigned to the idea that we would again not find *Thrinax ekmaniana*, when suddenly to our left the faint outline of three mogotes appeared. We immediately stopped and piled out with our binoculars. On one side of one hill we could make out what looked like small lollipops sticking up above the rest of the vegetation. I knew we had found *Thrinax ekmaniana*, and that our quest was finally over. It seemed like hours, but actually took 30 minutes to fly over some of the roughest paths yet to reach the bottom of the mogotes, where we could easily see the palms. There was a farm at the base of the mogotes where we received permission to go see the palms. We tore through the underbrush and began our ascent.

It was not an easy climb. The palms were close to the summit of a 500 (160 km) or 600 (200 km) foot solid limestone hill, extremely steep with very sharp and jagged edges. There were also some very sharp-pointed giant agaves and some very thorny acacia, which made the climb quite

memorable. Buzzards circling above and a horde of mosquitoes did not help matters, but adrenaline kept us going, and we reached the top rather quickly.

Seen from the summit, the palms were scattered right along the cliffs on the north side of the hill, ~250 feet (80 km) from the top. Over on the next mogote, we could see more. They were absolutely beautiful, unique, short palms under 3 m, with a petticoat of old leaves reminiscent of the Cuban petticoat palm, *Copernicia macroglossa*. The petioles were very short, with a few fibers giving the leaf bases a hairy appearance. Their slender trunks appeared glued to the limestone at the base, with only a mass of small fibrous roots showing. It was difficult to imagine how these palms could grow on solid rock with no apparent nutrients available. There were approximately 20 mature plants on the hill we were on and a similar number on the next hill. We learned later that there were some on the third hill as well, so the total population consisted of 50–60 mature palms, with only 40–50 small seedlings. It was good to see that the palms had all been tagged recently, and were obviously being studied by someone.

The sun had begun to set when we suddenly realized that we still had to negotiate a descent from the top of the mogote. Luckily, we found a path used by farmers and researchers keeping watch on the plants. On the way down we noticed species of philodendron, bromeliads, plumeria, and other vegetation we had not seen anywhere else. This was obviously a very unusual habitat, isolated by many km of savannas. We learned from the farmers that they were entrusted with guarding the palms, and they showed us pictures of them taken back in the '30s and '40s. They were very proud of these palms, and checked on them constantly.

While talking to Dr. Celio Moya Lopez on a later trip, I learned that there would be an effort made to establish more *T. ekmaniana* palms on the mogotes. Up until now, there has been no success in germinating seed. Because there are very few seedlings on the mogote, this appears to be a genuine concern. *T. ekmaniana* is a greatly threatened species with a very small population in an extremely restricted habitat, and does not seem to reproduce well. It is not known to be cultivated anywhere. This is true of species everywhere in the world, but at least this species and habitat seem well-protected for now; and an effort will be made to establish more individuals.

Finding this palm was the highlight of all the trips I have taken to Cuba. Considering all the palms and cycads I have seen there, some even more threatened than *Thrinax ekmaniana*, finding it was still the most thrilling experience I have ever had. Only those fortunate enough to have been on a mission to locate a particular species, finally discovering it despite great odds, can understand the exhilaration involved.

The palms of Cuba include many unique species, of which *Thrinax ekmaniana* is but one. I hope someone better qualified than myself will take an interest in these palms and do some much-needed taxonomic work. In particular, the genera *Coccothrinax*, *Copernicia*, and *Thrinax* all are in need of study. Is there someone out there up to the challenge?

PALM LITERATURE *(Continued from p. 149)*

The book is handsomely illustrated with 187 color plates, three tables, and a series of maps showing the decreased area of the palm groves and the spread of urbanization. The book is easy to read (if you read Spanish), with a touch of poetry, and it represents a major new contribution to our knowledge about the importance of the white palm in history and in the contemporary culture of Elche. It is well-produced and contains the best information related to this topic. Every palm enthusiast and anyone interested in ethnobotany, especially of palms and the genus *Phoenix*, will want to add it to his library.

NORA MARTINEZ

TRIBUTE TO PHILIPPE CREMER

Good night, Philippe, we will sorely miss you and your inspiration. You had a passionate interest in palms that few understood.

I remember well my first meeting with Philippe Cremer. It was during my first trip to South Africa. The trip was extraordinary as I had gotten on an airplane and flown 21 hours to meet a person I did not know in order to travel four days into the tribal homelands in pursuit of *Jubaeopsis*. That was the extent of my raging palmophilia. The *Jubaeopsis* Reserve in the Mkambati is a special place. It is a laboratory of evolution and a monument to the splendor of biological diversity. That trip began my friendship with Philippe. I was fascinated by his infectious interest in the palms and his desire not just to learn about this palm but to thoroughly understand the other cocoids such as *Jubaea chilensis* and *Cocos nucifera*. His understanding was not limited to knowing the palms but also included the paleoecology, geology, and even the tribal

languages of the areas where they resided. All this was the interest of a plumber who had escaped the Mau-Mau rebellion of the Belgian Congo with barely his life and the clothes on his back. He told me once he returned to Belgium after the revolution as they spoke French. He said he did not stay because he did not fit in there. He felt there is something unusual about South Africans; they are a special breed that do not fit in anywhere else in the world. He had an economy with words but his keen interest and passion resonated from his personality.

We nurtured friendship through correspondence and exchanging books. I grew intellectually from this exchange of ideas and observations. My interest and knowledge blossomed. His interest too had matured as he had taken trips to Madagascar, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique, and was planning a long trip to Zaire.

When I returned in 1991, he was still on this quest but his life had been turned upside down as he had become divorced and was living in a one-room flat in Durban's central slum. Though this had happened and he was living hand-to-mouth trying to make ends meet with a small furniture business, he was as cheerful as ever and still maintained his Quixotic pursuit of interests, as he was rethinking his plans for returning to Madagascar. His raffish grin and Gallic passion for life were certainly very disconcerting for many in the staid South African society.

I remember several years later when my life had (similarly) turned upside down I received a card from him about a South African Palm Congress inviting me with four words: "Can you join us?"

I wish you could join us now but you can't. I salute you Philippe. The world was better because of you and we regret your passing. Good night and may you exist in your dreams of palms.

EDWIN BROWN