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Tectiphiala ferox H. E. Moore

The wettest part of Mauritius is home to the unusual palm *Tectiphiala ferox*. During a recent hike through the region, not surprisingly in heavy rain, the species was observed and photographed in flower. The individual in this photograph is larger than most, at nearly five meters tall. Its bright yellow inflorescences stand out against the silver-grey undersides of the leaves and the cloudy sky.

Tectiphiala ferox is one of five palm species endemic to Mauritius. Like the others, it is highly endangered and restricted to a very small part of the island. At present, it survives in remnants of native moist shrubland, in the central mountains south of Curepipe. *Tectiphiala* may have been quite common until about 30 years ago, when large portions of its range were cleared. Much of the area had been converted to pine plantations well before 1978, when the genus was described by H. E. Moore Jr.

Moore estimated a total population size of 28 individuals, noting several small groups scattered between the tracts of timber plantations. Some of these have disappeared since then, including the group of cespitose individuals at the type locality. All plants known to exist today have a solitary habit.

Though there has been a gradual loss of known populations, several others have been discovered in recent years. It is now estimated that more than 50 adult *Tectiphiala* plants remain. They flower regularly, with occasional seed production, but seedlings are never found naturally in the wild. Regeneration is prevented by vigorous exotic plants, such as Chinese guava (*Psidium littorale*). These outcompete slow-growing palm seedlings.

The National Parks and Conservation Service has been able to raise *Tectiphiala* from wild-collected seeds. The seedlings are planted among wild stands in managed plots, where invasive exotics are cleared away. With care, the *Tectiphiala* seedlings are becoming established gradually (see photo below).

CARL E. LEWIS



Tectiphiala ferox seedling, four years of age, cultivated for reintroduction into the wild.

