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Brazoria Hybrid Palm Update

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In 1989 I began the effort to protect the Brazoria County *Sabal mexicana* × *S. minor* hybrid palms, or at least the ones that stood on a 40 acre tract that was for sale, by trying to find some conservation organization to buy the tract. Shortly after I began this effort an International Palm Society member in Victoria, the late Dennis O'Connor, responded to my plea for help in raising money to buy the tract by offering to contribute \$40,000 toward the purchase price, if others would contribute a matching amount. I then began a campaign to raise a matching amount, and find a conservation organization to accept the tract and protect it, if I could raise the money to buy it. So the donations would be tax-exempt I arranged for the Brazosport Nature Center and Planetarium, a tax-exempt organization, to accept and hold contributions. To solicit such contributions, and urge people to write The Nature Conservancy of Texas and the Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife asking them to protect the tract, I prepared a slide show titled *Texas' Invisible Palms* and showed it at meetings of interested groups, such as the San Antonio and Austin chapters of the Native Plant Society of Texas, the Travis Audubon Society, the Houston chapter of the IPS and the Piney Woods Wildlife Society. Concurrently I gave scientific papers on the Brazoria palms at a meeting of the Texas Academy of Science and at the annual symposium of the Native Plant Society of Texas, and published a cover article on them in *Principes* (1991, pp. 64–71). A total of about \$4,000 was collected, with \$1,000 from the International Palm Society and \$500 from the Piney Woods Wildlife Society.

My main focus, however, was on The Nature Conservancy of Texas, since I felt it was the most appropriate organization to protect the palms, even though it had initially shown no interest. For one thing, I wanted TNCT to be the one to bargain with the owner, since their negotiators were far more experienced than I was. Accordingly Dennis O'Connor changed his original offer. He wrote TNCT Director David Braun say-

ing that if TNCT agreed to buy the tract he would contribute \$40,000 to TNCT. And along about then (1991) I wrote President Bush, whom I had once met back in 1957, telling him about the Brazoria hybrids and suggesting that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service acquire the tract. I never heard from Bush, but eventually received a letter from the regional office of the USFWS advising me that President Bush had sent my letter on to them. Soon afterward the long stalemate with TNCT began to break. USFWS informed TNCT that it would make the palm tract part of the nearby San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge if TNCT would buy the tract and donate it to USFWS. This made protecting the tract a much more attractive option to TNCT since it meant that TNCT would not have to administer the site. USFWS biologist Mike Lange, who had always been enthusiastic about the Brazoria palms, had much to do with persuading USFWS to make this offer. Meanwhile various biologists who advise TNCT (such as Professor Larry Gilbert, Chairman of Zoology at the University of Texas at Austin, and TNCT's own biologist, Tom Hayes) visited the palm site and urged acquisition. Helping push this process along was the discovery that the dense coastal forest of Brazoria, Matagorda, Fort Bend and Wharton counties is a vital recovery area for birds arriving from South and Central America during spring migration, and USFWS has embarked on an effort to save as much of this forest as possible.

Finally, in 1992, three and a half years after I began the campaign, TNCT agreed to buy the palm tract, and TNCT lawyer Robert Potts began negotiations with the owner. It was not, however, until 1994 that Potts, after much delay and many difficulties, was able to buy the western 20 acres of the 40 acre tract. This was not what we had originally hoped for, but was the part with the most palms (including the tallest, Fig. 1), and was all there was money for, considering what the owner was asking. After all, TNCT has a necessary policy of never paying more than the market



1. The tallest of the Brazoria hybrids. Photo by R. De Lay.

price, and, for all the attractiveness of the palms for palm enthusiasts, the land is of little economic value. Subsequently TNCT acquired, from another owner, an adjoining three acre tract, and eventually the total of 23 acres was donated to the USFWS.

The Brazoria hybrids we know about (Fig. 2) are almost all concentrated on several tracts of land which add up to about 90 acres. There are, however, three palms we know of beyond this area—two near it and one two miles away. And, given the density of the forest, and the fact that it



2. Another large hybrid with Mike Rayburn (blue shirt) and others from the Texas Area Chapter. Photo by R. De Lay.

is almost all privately owned, there could well be other individual palms, or even clusters, we don't know about. After all, the second tallest palm (16 foot trunk) on the 23 acre tract was not discovered until the tract was being surveyed for sale to TNCT. Obviously we (including USFWS) would like to see more of the hybrids discovered, and more of the tracts making up the 90 acres acquired. Whether this happens will depend on the availability of funds, and willing sellers.

Finally, although the evidence discussed in

my *Principes* article strongly suggests that these palms are *Sabal mexicana* \times *S. minor* hybrids, so far I have not found any botanist to do a genetic study to show that this is indeed what they are. Such proof, or even proof that they are something else, should help create interest in protecting more of them.

(This article appeared in the Vol. 9, No. 4 (July 1988) newsletter of the Houston, Texas Area chapter of IPS, along with a short account by Randy De Lay of a Chapter field trip to the site.—eds)