

# Remembrances of Kenneth C. Foster

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**Ken Foster, for long an active member of the IPS and past President, died in Hawaii in 2002.**

When I first became interested in palms in 1971 and joined The International Palm Society, then known simply as The Palm Society, a handful of well known personages dominated the palm scene in southern California. To a young 21-year-old college student and budding palm fanatic, the names Pauleen and Joe Sullivan, Lois and Kurt Rossten, Jim Wright, Ed Moore, Jim Specht, Mardy Darian, Burt Greenburg and Ken Foster were awe-inspiring and much revered. I held them in the highest esteem and nearly worshipped the ground they walked on. I hovered around them at meetings as they held court, trying to glean as much information as possible while listening to their pontifications and contentious debate about how best to grow palms or who had the rarest or biggest or nicest specimen. It was always entertaining and sometimes educational.

## First Meeting With Ken

Ken Foster was one of the most imposing of these personages. I was saddened to hear of his death, and the news conjured up many poignant memories of him. Known simply as Ken to friends and fellow palmophiles, he had just begun a two-year term as president of The Palm Society in 1972 when I first met him.

It was August, 1972 at a grand Southern California Palm Society meeting at Mardy Darian's in Vista, California when I finally mustered up the courage to approach him and ask about palms in Guatemala. I would be driving a car to Guatemala with a college friend who was from that country, and I wanted to be sure to see as many palms as possible on my trip.

Ken had just returned from The Palm Society Biennial Meeting in Mexico City and a post-meeting excursion to Guatemala and Costa Rica. He was hobbling around in a cast because he had broken his leg at La Selva on the Costa Rican portion of his trip (See *Principes* 16: 134–135 (1972) for his account of this trip and accident.). He was looking up to see the palms when he took a misstep on a rain-soaked jungle path and fell, breaking his leg. Nevertheless, and in an authoritative manner, he explained in great detail where to see palms in Guatemala and especially encouraged me to visit Tikal. He also told me to obtain a copy of Paul Standley's and Julian Steyermark's *Flora of Guatemala* in which Hal Moore had provided the palm treatment. I always wondered what he thought when this 20-year-old college student with shoulder-length hair, bell-bottom jeans, and a flowery shirt shyly and hesitantly asked him for information about Guatemalan palms.

## Ken's Thorough Preparation for Palm Collecting Trips

Ken would research palms before embarking on a collecting expedition. I learned from his example for future trips I would take, including several with Ken. He was thoroughly prepared. He knew exact localities where the palms grew, fruiting seasons, and local contacts to provide assistance. Not only searching the literature, Ken carried on lively correspondence with Hal Moore and other palm experts and enthusiasts who could provide information about the palms he had targeted for collection.

All this reflected his dedication and love for palms and his never-ending quest to grow as many species as possible in cultivation. I think his quest to bring new palms into cultivation was the driving force of his life. Some might think his quest was selfish and egotistical, designed primarily to gain fame and recognition. While there may have been some of this, I also know, from long conversations with him on our trips, that he had an altruistic motive as well, and sincerely wanted to advance the science and conservation of palms. He usually shared seeds and sometimes even seedlings with botanical institutions such as Fairchild Tropical Garden in Florida and Honolulu Botanic Gardens in Hawaii. Indeed, several of his New Guinea, New Caledonia, and other South Pacific collections are thriving at Ho'omaluhia of the Honolulu Botanic Gardens system.

### Remarkable Palm Grower

Ken was a remarkable palm grower and perhaps unsurpassed as a germinator of palm seeds. I recall many visits to his greenhouse at his home in Yorba Linda, California and staring down into his

1. Ken Foster in his Hawaiian garden with *Bactris militaris*, November, 2000. He grew this palm from seeds he had collected in Costa Rica.



germination chamber or sweatbox in absolute amazement. Community pots, most with germinating seeds as thick as hair on a dog's back, entirely covered the bottom of this box. All were carefully labeled and dated, and most were rare and unusual palms. He would rattle off the botanical names of these germinated seeds effortlessly, names I had never heard of but nonetheless sounded like magic to me.

Ken always seemed to have the rarest, choicest, and greatest number of species. Nobody could challenge or compare with him in this category. Although he was mum and discrete about his sources, we always suspected he had the best connection to the Palm Society Seed Bank and was usually at or near the head of the line when it came time to the distribution of seeds. Ken was also well connected to other palm collectors and growers, especially those in Florida, and frequently shared seeds with them.

### Ken's Collecting Trips

Ken and I went to New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and Fiji collecting palms in 1977 and 1979. He visited Samoa in 1979 and Papua New Guinea twice in 1981. He had to cut short his first trip there when he fell and injured himself, not too seriously, and then returned to complete the trip after he had recovered. He had also collected in the Caribbean, Mexico and Central America, and South America.

I probably know Ken best from the time we spent together on two memorable palm-collecting trips to the south-west Pacific in 1977 and 1979. We visited New Caledonia, Vanuatu and Fiji and were responsible for introducing several palms at that time new to cultivation, including *Burretiokentia hapala*, *Cyphosperma balansae*, *Kentiopsis magnifica*, *Veillonina alba*, *Clinostigma harlandii* and *Veitchia spiralis*, among others. Ken even hiked up to 700 meters on Mt. Panié in New Caledonia and was able to see every palm species on the mountain, a veritable palm heaven or Shangri-La where every palmophile must make the pilgrimage at least once.

Although Ken was well prepared for these trips, he frequently fretted, had a negative outlook and discounted our chances of finding all the palms in fruit. He was the ultimate gloom-and-doom person. I am sure he was under a lot of pressure to make these trips a success, which they invariably were, because his desire to get palms into cultivation was unusually strong. He feared failure, not only because he was a true and dedicated palm lover but also he did not want to disappoint financial donors who would receive shares of seeds. Despite his frequently negative

outlook, Ken was not without his dry wit and self-deprecating and “gallows” humor on these trips, which made the hard and difficult times a little more endurable.

For example, we were in the Rivière Bleue in New Caledonia in 1977 and had spied fruits of *Campecarpus fulcitus* about 25 feet up the trunk, too high to reach it with our pole pruner or sling. Because I was younger, and perhaps more foolish and reckless, I always did the climbing. Unfortunately, this palm was leaning at a precarious angle and looked as if any added weight would bring it crashing down onto some jagged rocks. I shared my concerns with Ken and he replied, “Well, when the palm starts to fall, you can ride it down and jump off as it nears the ground, landing safely on your feet!” Say what! When I looked at him he was wearing a sly grin and chuckling to himself.

In Vanuatu on Aneityum Island searching for *Carpoxyton macrosperma*, *Veitchia spiralis* and *Clinostigma harlandii* in 1979, we had to stay in a forester’s quarters. Ken’s bed was a metal frame with a thin mattress. At night he rigged his mosquito netting using a spare electric cord for support. Standing back and admiring his handiwork he remarked dryly, “I hope no one plugs in this cord tonight.” From then on it was known simply as “the electric bed.” It mattered not that there was no electricity at the time.

He also stayed for several days with my wife and me in Hawaii in 1979 on his way to the South Pacific on a palm-collecting trip. We took him to see and collect seeds of all the species of *Pritchardia*, the native Hawaiian fan palm, on the island of Hawaii. All these trips and my time spent with him gave me an opportunity to know more about him and his passion and desire for palms. Because he was well connected in The Palm Society, he also had the latest Society gossip, which he would frequently share with me on our long walks in the forest. He swore me to secrecy!

### **The 1974 Biennial Meeting and Post-Meeting Trip to Colombia**

As his final duties as president of The Palm Society, Ken had organized the 1974 Palm Society Biennial Meeting at Fairchild Tropical Garden in Florida and post-meeting trip to Colombia. It was the first biennial meeting I would attend and my first exposure to a wide array of tropical palms while in the company of knowledgeable palmophiles. Needless to say, the number and diversity of palms to see in South Florida overwhelmed me.

Ken had also arranged an optional side trip to the Langlois Estate in the Bahamas. One of the much

anticipated palms for me to see was the Langlois’ namesake, *Areca langloisiana* with its stunning orange-yellow crownshafts, which John Dransfield had just recently placed in synonymy with *A. vestiaria*, an earlier name that had priority. I clearly remember Ken standing at the edge of a small limestone depression rimmed with palmophiles staring down in wonder and amazement at the Langlois’ palm and pronouncing for everyone to hear, including the Langlois, “It will always be *Areca langloisiana* to us.”

The post-meeting trip to Colombia was memorable not only because we visited one of the richest palm regions in the world but also because it was the trip of lost and delayed luggage, lost people at night in a tropical rain forest, and delayed and cancelled flights. We had arrived in Cali to find that our luggage had not left Miami and we would not have it for two days. Undeterred, we set out the next day in our Sunday finest to visit Tenerife in the mountains outside Cali to view *Ceroxylon quindiuense*. I vividly remember Mardy Darian, among many others, excitedly dashing off in white dress trousers and oxfords into the forest and mud at the sight of a palm, cycad, or aroid (See *Principes* 18: 119–131 (1974) for an account of the post-meeting trip to Colombia.). The just-mentioned article displays Ken’s artful photography at its best. His photograph of three *Ceroxylon quindiuense* in an onion field is exemplary.

Finally with our luggage in tow, we headed over the mountains and down to the Pacific equatorial lowland rain forest near Buenaventura. With over 400 inches (about 10 meters) of rain annually, this region is one of the rainiest spots and is one of the richest in palms in the world. With several guides our group headed into the forest at Baja Calima. Because just about everyone was stopping to collect palms or aroids, our once tight-knit group of 29 palmophiles became strung out over several hundred yards and three groups were formed, all of which eventually lost contact with each other.

I was in the front group with Ken and several others, including a guide. We had been walking in torrential rain for several hours. The rain, deep mud and obstacles in the trail, such as fallen trees, slowed our progress, as did our desire to have the other groups catch up with us. Night fell quickly and we were trapped in the rain forest without flashlights. Fortunately, we had an excellent guide who apparently could see in the dark. We formed a human chain, each of us with one hand on the person in front, like a line of circus elephants, and several hours of walking in total darkness, slipping, stumbling, and falling over roots and branches and crossing streams on slippery, moss-covered

logs, finally brought us to our destination. We were relieved to find that the other two groups had made it back safely before nightfall.

Regrouped and refreshed, we headed back to Cali the next day to find that our flight to Pasto, high up in the Andes, had been cancelled due to bad weather. It was one stroke of bad luck after another and pushed Ken's patience to the limit. Because he had planned the entire trip, he shouldered a heavy burden of responsibility over the frequent but relatively minor calamities befalling the group. His chief concern was to ensure that everyone was having a rewarding time. After consultation with the group, Ken gave permission for two small groups to break off from the main group, one going down into the Amazon to look for lowland tropical palms and the other finally flying into Pasto to search for cool tolerant, high-altitude palms. The main group returned to Buenaventura, making several stops along the way to look for palms we had missed on our first sodden excursion. After several days the three groups met up in Cali prior to returning to Florida. All the groups had been successful and the seeds of nearly 25 species of palms were shared among everyone. It was a positive end to an unusually eventful trip.

### Ken's Grand Palm Sales

Because he was germinating a lot of palm seeds, Ken ended up with a lot of potted palms. Many of the palms he propagated were too tropical to grow outside in California, so he kept them in containers in his great Quonset-hut style greenhouse. This greenhouse blew down in a terrible Santa Ana wind on Christmas Eve, 1972, destroying or damaging most of the marginal and tropical palms (See *Principes* 17: 54–55 (1973) for his account of this calamity). Undaunted, Ken rebuilt a much stronger greenhouse, specially reinforced to withstand the high winds of Yorba Linda, and it seemed that in no time he had restocked it with rare and choice palms.

What would Ken do with all the palms he grew? He was an enterprising palm grower and more or less invented or pioneered the big private palm sale now so common in southern California. In the late 1970s and early 1980s Ken would have an annual sale to dispose of excess palms.

Hundreds of people attended his well advertised and promoted sales because it was the only opportunity to purchase these rare and choice palms. At Ken's signal, a conch shell horn would sound, a rope barrier drop, and a mad scramble ensued to run to the tables and grab your desired palm. Pushing, shoving and elbowing were not uncommon, and more than a few contentious

debates broke out over who grabbed a palm first and was the legitimate purchaser. In the earlier sales there was no rope barrier and the buyers were allowed to stand next to the desired palm, their hand just inches away (they were not allowed to touch the palm), ready to grab it at the sound of the horn. This method worked well until some enterprising palmophile brought family, friends, and neighbor kids and positioned them next to the palms he wanted, their hands hovering just an inch from the palm and waiting to grab it at the blowing of the shell. Many buyers complained this method was inherently unfair so Ken instituted the rope barrier, theoretically giving everyone an equal shot at any palm. Because it was essentially a horse race to the palms, though, the aged, weak, and slow usually lost out.

### Ken's Earlier Life and Occupation

Born October 4, 1929 in Chelsea, Massachusetts, Ken grew up in the Boston area. He majored in French horn at the New England Conservatory of Music and served four years in the U.S. Army Field Band in Washington, D.C. Ken later studied commercial photography at the Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, California. An accomplished photographer, he used his talent and skill and his graphic arts background in publishing *The Palm Society Western Chapter Newsletter* (now *The Palm Journal*) in its early years. His high quality palm photographs have appeared in that journal and *Principes*. He even wrote an article about photographing palms (see *Principes* 12: 136–141 (1968)).

Ken was self-employed as a plant jobber in southern California, buying lining out stock of succulents and foliage plants from growers and reselling them to other nurseries. He was a frustrated palm enthusiast living in California and always extolled the virtues of southern Florida and made clear his longing to live there, so that he could grow a wider diversity of palms. He would eventually realize his dream and move to Florida in the 1980s but even there he was not satisfied. To grow his beloved palms he went even more tropical and moved to Hawaii in 1990. He worked for a commercial palm grower near Hilo and then went into business for himself as a palm consultant and later collected and sold commercial quantities of palm seeds. He bought a piece of rain forest near Hilo on the Big Island of Hawaii, and started to assemble his palm collection and plant his palms.

### Ken in Hawaii

I don't know much about Ken's time in Hawaii although he told me, and I could see, that he was

at his final stop for palms. He had found his paradise, his Shangri-La. In 1998 and 2000 I spent several days with him as my guide, visiting the more important public and private palm collections in and around Hilo, Hawaii. It was a grand time because we saw palms, talked palms and reminisced about our past times (Fig. 1). He had amassed quite a collection of palms, most of which were still in containers. Somewhat frustrated, he frequently lamented to me that he was unable to plant as many palms as he wanted in his piece of rain forest around his home simply

because he had insufficient time. Slowly failing health and his palm-seed-collecting business slowed or eliminated his palm-planting activity.

Ken loved palms. Few equalled and none surpassed his passion and desire to grow as many species as possible. While others may be or were more acquisitive, no one loved palms with such passion the way Ken did. Many of the palms seen in gardens in California, Florida and, especially, Hawaii are ones he introduced, and they stand proudly as the most appropriate memorials to Ken.

## Photo Feature



Dates (*Phoenix dactylifera*) are one of the most important agricultural crops in the Arabian Peninsula. Wherever the water supply permits, date groves are planted and tended, adding considerably to the beauty of the landscape. Here in Wadi Tiwi in the mountains of eastern Oman, dates occupy the spring-fed valley bottoms amid the rugged limestone mountains (Photo: J. Dransfield).