

Phoenix roebelenii on the Mekong and Ou Rivers

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1. *Phoenix roebelenii* on the Mekong near the port of Guanlei



This paper provides observations on the distribution and habitat of *Phoenix roebelenii* on two rivers in Indochina.

In 1994 Sasha Barrow wrote a very informative paper for *Principes* (now, of course, *Palms*), "In Search of *Phoenix roebelenii*: The Xishuangbanna Palm." The paper detailed the history of *P. roebelenii* O'Brien, information on its habitat, its conservation status and the single stemmed form usual in cultivation and commonly known as the Pygmy Date Palm.

The paper introduced us to the clustering form of *P. roebelenii*.

In 2009 and 2010 we travelled on the Mekong River a distance of 700 km from Ganlanba, 34 km south of Jinghong, in Xishuangbanna, China, to Louangphrabang (Luang Prabang) in central, northern Lao PDR (Laos).



2. *Phoenix roebelenii* on the Mekong near the port of Guanlei.

The Mekong River

The Mekong River is 4350 km long. In China, the Mekong River is called the Lancang River. Towards the most southern part of China the river forms the border with Myanmar (Burma).

Further downstream the Chinese port of Guanlei is the river border check point between Laos and China. The Mekong then flows between Myanmar and Laos until it reaches The Golden Triangle, where Thailand

3. *Phoenix roebelenii* on the Mekong near the port of Guanlei.



begins. The Mekong flows between Thailand and Laos for nearly 100 km until it has Laos on both sides.

After leaving Ganlanba, we saw *Phoenix roebelenii* well represented on rocky sections of the river banks by small groups of palms with clustering stems to 1.5 m tall. Significant roads were being bulldozed on both banks and large amounts of soil were being forced over into the river covering many of the palms.

Further down the river towards the port of Guanlei, the river banks had not been disturbed, and *P. roebelenii* was prolific (Figs. 1–3). Colonies of the palm with clustering stems 30–50 mm in diameter up to 5 m tall were growing on the rocky banks and on small cliffs and islands protruding from the river. If conditions were suitable for them, they grew from the high level of the river to 15 m up the banks. When the river is high, palms on rocks in the river and those close to the edge are completely submerged for some time.

After passing Guanlei the Mekong was often narrow, deep and very swift. *Phoenix roebelenii* continued to grow in large numbers in every available location, which made the scenery spectacular. This remote part of the river was controlled; shipping had been restricted for many years to prevent opium entering China from The Golden Triangle. It had also been closed to foreign tourists for many years.

Approximately 80 km downstream from the port of Gaunlei the palm population became less dense and individuals were smaller in stature with slender clustering stems (Fig. 4). After Xieng Kok (a Laos check point), there were numerous small plants of *P. roebelenii* for only a short distance, then there were no more.

After leaving this section of the river we reached The Golden Triangle and the border between Myanmar and Thailand. Many kilometers later after we had passed Thailand and were well into Laos we saw a handful of small *P. roebelenii* occurring on a remote part of the river.

The Ou River

The Ou River (Nam Ou in Lao) is 380 km long. It begins in China and enters the eastern side of Laos near Vietnam. It flows south and southwest through gorges and mountain valleys before joining the Mekong at Ban Pak Ou, 24 km north of Luang Prabang.

We joined the river at Hat Sa north of Phongsali in Laos and traveled to Luang Prabang. *Phoenix roebelenii* grows wild in scattered populations for a distance of 100 km on many sections of the river between Hat Sa and 20 km before Muang Ngoi (Fig. 5). It is likely that the palm also occurs north of Hat Sa towards the Chinese border.

4. *Phoenix roebelenii* on the Mekong near Xieng Kok, Laos.





5. *Phoenix roebelenii* on the Ou River, Laos.

Near Muang Khua, about 70 km down river from Hat Sa, *P. roebelenii* had stems that were thicker than the palms on the Mekong; they were approximately 100 mm in diameter. There were individual palms with straight stems 2–4 m tall. We could not go ashore, and from the river we were unable to ascertain if the palms had single stems or had clustering stems. The tall individual palms may have had small stems clustering from their bases, or there may have been numerous seedlings regenerating beneath palms with single stems.

Discussion

On the Mekong undisturbed populations of clustering *P. roebelenii* occur between Ganlanba, China, and Xieng Kok, Laos, for a distance of approximately 150 km. On either side of this range populations have been disturbed, and palms have been removed in large numbers. Now only a few areas of small palms remain. *Phoenix roebelenii* no longer grows wild in Thailand, and it does not grow for 100 km either side of Thailand's borders. These palms have been removed from the river banks and taken to Thailand for sale. Restrictions on shipping and travel from The Golden Triangle through the remote region between Laos and Myanmar towards the Chinese border may have saved some of the palms from poachers. There is still a section of the Mekong that is relatively natural along which *P. roebelenii* still flourishes.

On the Ou River *P. roebelenii* grows on most of the rocky banks and rocky outcrops of the

river. One could expect to see a larger number of tall or mature palms than are there. Palms may have been removed and taken to Vietnam or Thailand for sale but they have not been used in Laos. It is very rare to see *P. roebelenii* in cultivation in any town or city in Laos.

Sasha Barrow discussed the saturation of Thai markets with *P. roebelenii* collected from the wild, the difficulty of traders collecting tall plants without going further afield and the large quantities of seeds that were collected and being grown for future use. Growing plants from seed may have also had a positive effect on the conservation of this palm. Seventeen years after Sasha Barrow's paper there is little evidence that *P. roebelenii* is still being removed from the Mekong or Ou Rivers. Pressure may be off the palm in Thailand and other countries in Indochina, but pressure may be resumed if *P. roebelenii* becomes a desirable landscape palm in China.

Several dams are being constructed on the Lancang River in China and proposed on the Mekong in northern Laos. It is anticipated they will lower the level of the river. If this occurs the habitat of *P. roebelenii* may be modified, and the palm may be subjected to a new threat.

LITERATURE CITED

- BARROW, S. 1994. In search of *Phoenix roebelenii*: the Xishuangbanna Palm. *Principes* 38: 177–181.