Montgomery Botanical NEWS

Advancing Research, Conservation, and Education through Scientific Plant Collections

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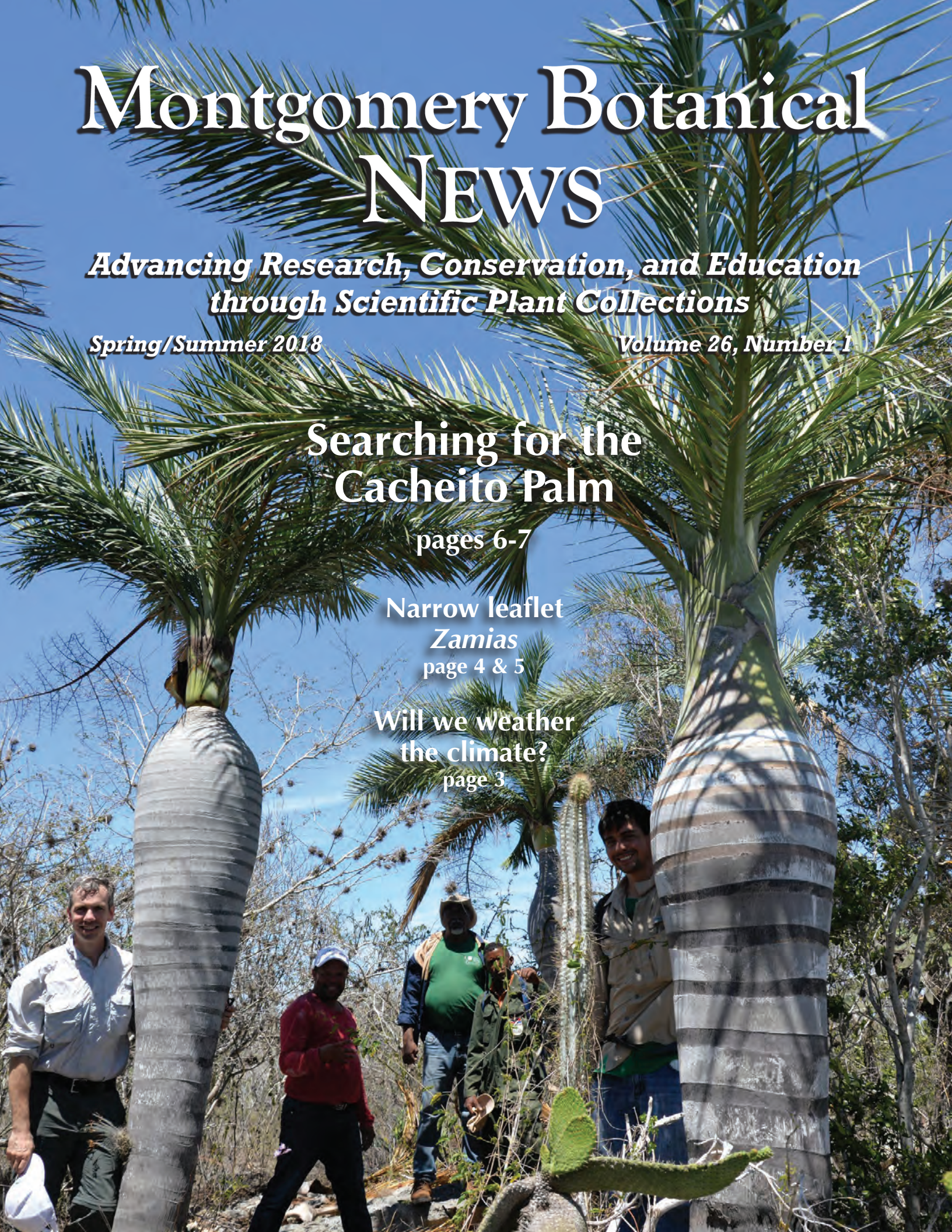

Searching for the Cacheito Palm

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Narrow leaflet *Zamias*

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Will we weather the climate?

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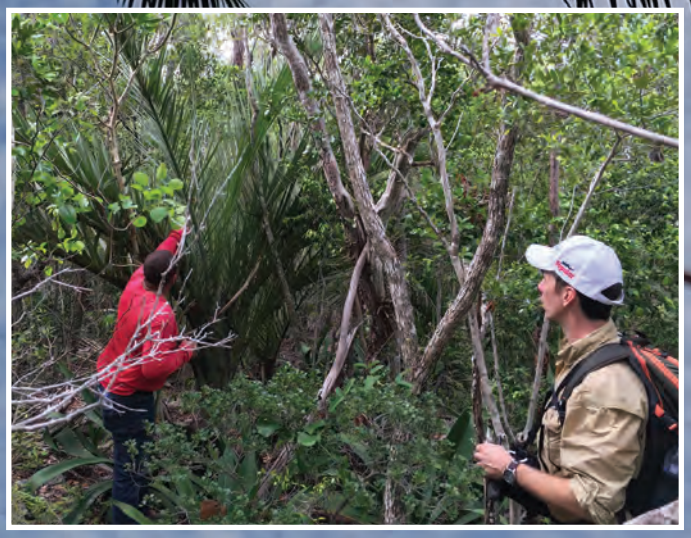
The Cacheito Palm

A Remote Botanical Treasure

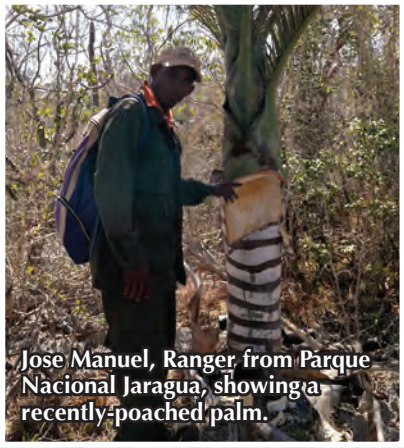


Pedro and Patrick collecting a specimen of Cacheito. DNA data from these leaf samples will help botanic gardens to determine the best ways to conserve this living treasure.

This unique species is only known from the southern Dominican Republic. A close relative of Florida's Buccaneer Palm, the Cacheito was officially listed as Endangered in the Red List of the Dominican Republic, due to its restricted range and ongoing reduction in its population size.

Our recent joint expedition with Jardin Botanico Rafael Moscoso – the National Botanical Garden of the Dominican Republic – sought to collect seeds and DNA samples of wild *Pseudophoenix ekmanii*. Though we focused on these scientific specimens, this work also gave us the unique opportunity to see first-hand the current state of this endangered species. Like *Pseudophoenix sargentii*, its Florida native counterpart, this slow growing, uniquely beautiful palm has been reduced to small numbers. My role on this expedition included being an interpreter – I admit I was worried about whether I was up to that task, but I could not pass up the opportunity to see these palms in the wild.

Pseudophoenix ekmanii – also known as Cacheo de Oviedo or Cacheito – is a rare palm from the southern peninsula of Hispaniola. Growing to 20 feet tall on dog-tooth limestone, its dark green



Jose Manuel, Ranger from Parque Nacional Jaragua, showing a recently-poached palm.

leaves produce strong contrasting leaf scars along the pale gray stem (see photo, Acknowledgements), which swells broadly towards the top before thinning out near the crownshaft – truly a unique look!

Our team consisted of Pedro Toribio Lopez (Jardin Botanico Nacional), Teodoro Clase Garcia (Jardin Botanico Nacional), Jose Manuel (Park Ranger from Parque Nacional Jaragua), Patrick Griffith (Executive Director of Montgomery Botanical Center), and myself. We based our work in Pedernales, a remote town on the Haitian border. After eating breakfast, procuring water and heading out at dawn, Pedro turned the truck south along a limestone track, slowing from time to time to load and unload hitchhikers. After a time, we parked at a ranch to continue on foot.

I thought as a youth working in the Florida climate and in an outdoor career would prepare me for the hike – but by the end of the day I was humbled after descending and climbing a series of steep plateaus for many miles. Any exhaustion I felt was overshadowed by the good news that we were extremely fortunate enough to find palms with viable seeds early in the day. Over the course of two days we collected about 240 DNA samples and as many seeds, spending the evenings cataloging, cleaning and preparing these botanical treasures.

The Cacheito is endangered from poaching, and I was constantly reminded of this while we looked for them on our second day afield. The deeper we hiked into the parque, the more palms we found with trunks freshly carved to obtain sap – a fatal harvest. As a point of reference, these poachings were many miles from the road, showing how motivated the sap hunters were. The cut palms were often many decades old; sadly all of that growth was ended for some money and wine.

If nothing else, this realization shows just how important these conservation expeditions are and how much we can gain from them. We were fortunate enough to collect information, seeds, and samples from this imperiled palm, which can provide knowledge and protective cultivation. Spreading the word about the plight of Cacheito can help ensure its long term survival in this wild and remote corner of the Caribbean.

Xavier gathering leaflet specimens in the dense, arid forest.

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