

## Attalea crassispatha, an Endemic and Endangered Haitian Palm

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Most people are aware of the terrible destruction of tropical forests which is taking place throughout the world. Palms are predominantly tropical plants, and like other groups of plants and animals, many species are becoming threatened or endangered. Recently Dr. Dennis Johnson has initiated a project aimed at assessing the conservation status of neotropical palms, a project funded by the World Wildlife Fund (Johnson 1986). As part of this we have recently assessed the status of one of the New World's rarest palms, the Haitian *Attalea crassispatha* (Figs. 1-4).

Exactly 300 years ago the French naturalist Charles Plumier travelled to Haiti. Among the palms he discovered and illustrated was "palma cocifera, vaginis ventricosis & liratis" (Plumier 1703). This was one of the earliest scientific descriptions of a neotropical palm, even though the name, being pre-Linnean, is not validly published. Much later, Martius (1847) called the palm *Maximiliana crassispatha*, and later still Burret (1929a) transferred the palm to the genus *Attalea*, and so the name became *Attalea crassispatha* (C. Martius) Burret.

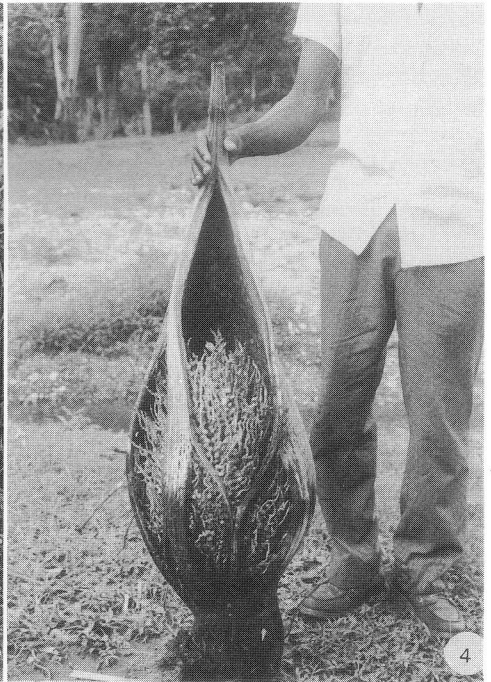
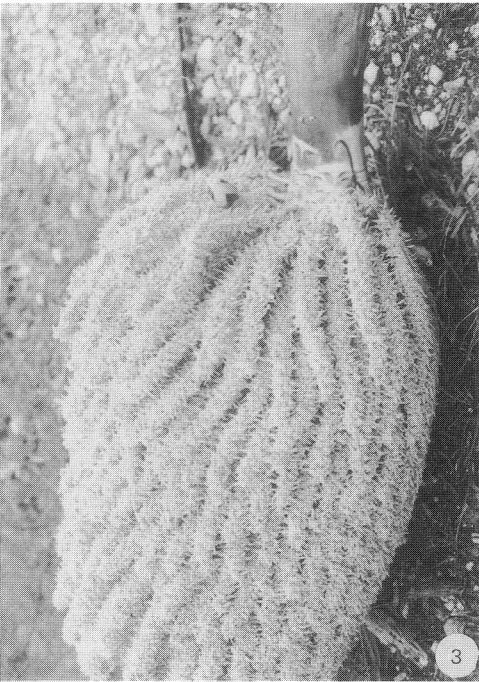
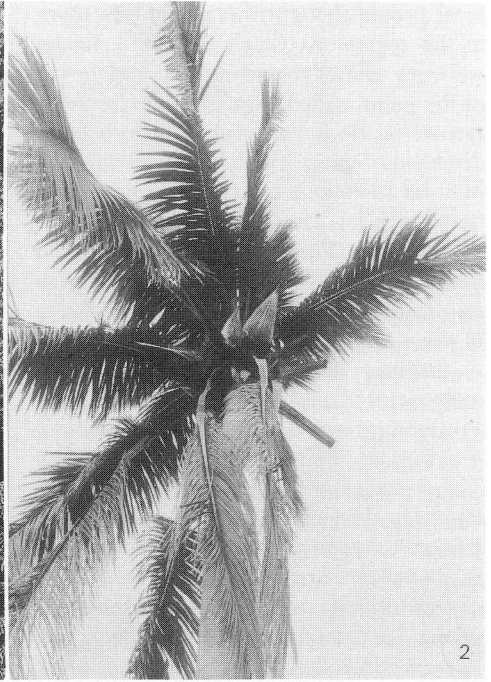
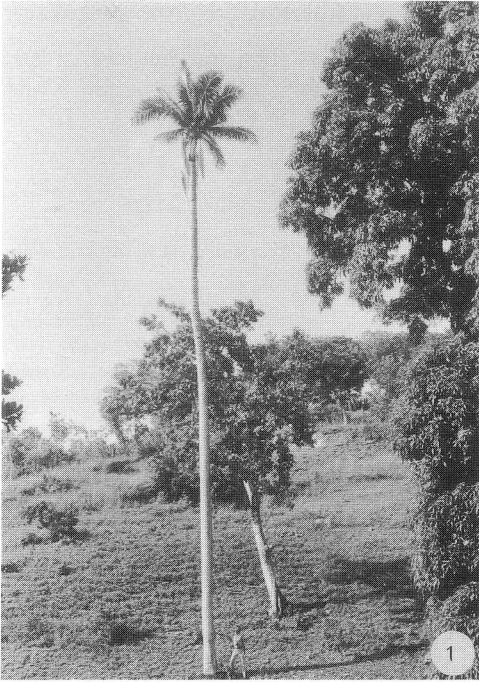
This palm, known to science for almost 300 years, has long fascinated botanists. Three of the most prolific students of palms during the early part of this century, Burret, Bailey, and Cook, all wrote about it, and the last two collected it in the same locality where Plumier saw it, at a place called Fond des Negres on Haiti's southwestern peninsula. Burret (1929b) repro-

duced more of Plumier's unpublished illustrations; Bailey (1939) called the palm "such a rare and mighty object"; Cook (1939) wrote "One of the largest and most attractive palms of the West Indian flora." Cook went on to propose the name *Bornoa* for the palm, after a president of Haiti, Borno. Cook's disregard of the rules of botanical nomenclature prevented the use of this name.

There are various reasons why the palm has received so much attention. One is its rarity, but it is also interesting for other reasons. It is the only species of the *Attaleinae* (*Attalea*, *Orbignya*, *Scheelea*, and *Maximiliana*) found outside of Central and South America (including Trinidad and Tobago). And it also has unusual staminate flowers, intermediate between those of *Attalea* and *Orbignya* (Fig. 3).

In November 1988 we travelled throughout Haiti's southwestern peninsula in order to look for *Attalea crassispatha*. We had four localities to investigate—Fond des Negres (Plumier's original locality); Ile à Vache (another locality given by Plumier); Glace, on the road to Pestel (suggested by Cook 1939); and near Cavaillon (suggested by Dr. Tom Zanoni). Dr. Zanoni had looked for the palm in 1983 and reported that just two plants existed at Fond des Negres.

Our first stop was Fond des Negres. We found our first tree easily; it had been blown down and killed by Hurricane Gilbert in September 1988. However we found two more adults and several seedlings, and



1. *Attalea crassipatha* at the type locality, Fond des Negres, with Michel Aubry for scale. The stem is approximately 20 m tall. 2. *Attalea crassipatha* near Cavaillon, with interfoliar inflorescences and infructescences. 3. Predominantly staminate inflorescence of *Attalea crassipatha*. 4. An old infructescence of *Attalea crassipatha*.

local people thought there might be more in the region. At Glace and Ile à Vache we were unlucky, and no one had heard of the palm, called 'corossier' in Creole. A farmer on Ile à Vache showed us a huge dead palm stem, which he had cut down in order to make a pigsty. It seemed likely that it was an *Attalea*, and the last one at that locality. Finally we were lucky, and near Cavaillon we found one, then two more, and eventually a small population of the palms growing on a steep hillside.

*Attalea crassispatha* is not only rare in the wild, but also in cultivation. Dr. John Popenoe informed us that three trees are growing at Fairchild Tropical Garden. These trees are approximately 8 m tall and in healthy condition, but have not yet flowered. Apparently few, if any, other cultivated plants are known.

Our future research plans include a study of the floral morphology of *Attalea crassispatha* in order to find its correct place in the Attaleinae. We are also initiating a program for the *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation of this magnificent Haitian palm.

## Acknowledgments

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