

# Exploring for Palms in Fiji

DONALD R. HODEL  
*University of California  
Cooperative Extension  
4800 E. Cesar Chavez Ave.  
Los Angeles, CA 90022 USA  
drhodel@ucdavis.edu*



1. Large, mostly undivided leaves characterize *Cyphosperma tanga*.

I traveled to Fiji in October, 2008 as part of a larger, long-term project to document and photograph palms on Pacific islands. Somewhat apprehensive as I departed Los Angeles on the non-stop, late-night flight to Nadi, Fiji, I had visited these delightful islands several times in the middle 1970s and was now profoundly curious about the changes that the more than 30 intervening years had brought.

Sakiusa Masitoqui, employed at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, the capital of Fiji, and who goes by the nickname Masi, met me at the Nadi International Airport early in the morning on October 1 and, over a quick introduction and breakfast, we briefly discussed plans for the next 18 days. We planned to spend several days based on the main Fijian island, Viti Levu, and then move on to the two other large islands, Vanua Levu and Taveuni, before finishing up with a trip to the Southern Lau group of islands to see the elusive *Pritchardia thurstonii* on mushroom-shaped, limestone islets in its lagoon habitat. Masi has great knowledge of Fijian palms, places and people and had assisted others in their quest to see Fiji's palms.

I rented a 4-wheel drive pick-up truck in Nadi, and we began what I thought would be a rather leisurely, several-hour, circular drive along the north coast to Suva on the other side of Viti Levu. Under threatening skies in Ba, north of Nadi, we stopped briefly to eat lunch and purchase a machete, rope, and a few other supplies. After lunch, Masi surprised me and said that his plan was for us to traverse the mountainous center of Viti Levu via Nadarivatu and Monasavu Dam to reach Suva, rather than follow the coastal route. Traversing

the center of Viti Levu would enable us to see several striking palms, some of which are found nowhere else in Fiji, including *Cyphosperma tanga* (affectionately known as "Big Leaf") and *Physokentia petiolata*. Although I was exhausted from the all night flight, Masi's plan excited me because it had been 30 years since I had last seen Big Leaf in 1978 in the company of the late Dick Phillips, long-time champion of Fijian palms, and the late Ken Foster, palm enthusiast and former president of the International Palm Society. The excitement of seeing Big Leaf just a few hours after stepping off the plane in Fiji helped to keep me awake as I drove the vehicle off the main highway and headed up a smaller, mountain road to Nadarivatu in a steady rain.

After 30 years the road up the western escarpment of Viti Levu to Nadarivatu was still familiar and, feeling confident, I thought I could nearly drive right to Big Leaf. After passing through Nadarivatu under threatening skies, we left the road and drove up a muddy track that I was sure I had walked 30 years before. I was thinking that this little trek was going to be easy. Unfortunately, the road seemed to end abruptly and unexpectedly, and the much disturbed vegetation no longer looked familiar to me. Even Masi, who had

2 (left). *Cyphosperma tanga* has an open, few branched inflorescence. 3 (right). Staminate flowers of *Cyphosperma tanga* are white.







4 (above, left). *Veitchia vitiensis* is a moderate to tall, very slender palm with gracefully spreading, pinnate leaves . 5 (above, right). *Neoveitchia storckii* is a large palm with long, spreading, pinnate leaves. 6 (below). The whitish inflorescences of *N. storckii* contrast nicely with the poorly developed but black crownshaft.

visited Big Leaf just the previous year, was unable to find the trail. We retreated to a small farm we had just passed where, after partaking in a brief *kava* ceremony and donating a gift, the Fijian farmer and his two sons agreed to guide us to Big Leaf.

With much anticipation and under a heavy drizzle, I followed Masi and the other Fijians up a rocky slope and into wet, undisturbed, mountain forest. Big Leaf had not lost its grandeur and with its large, undivided leaves looked every bit as imposing as 30 years ago (Fig. 1). Big Leaf has a slender, solitary trunk three to five meters feet tall and large, elongate, undivided or few-divided leaves three meters long with short petioles. The inflorescence, about one to two meters long, is loosely branched (Fig. 2) and at the moment was carrying small, white staminate flowers (Fig. 3). Growing nearby were the highly variable, mostly understory *Balaka longirostris* and *Veitchia vitiensis*, which we would encounter later on Viti Levu. (For a complete, fully illustrated account of *B. longirostris* and all other *Balaka* in Fiji and Samoa, see Hodel 2010).







7 (above). *Hydiastele vitiensis*, which covered valleys, slopes, and ridges, thrusts its spectacular canopy of arching, slightly recurved, pinnate leaves well above the forest trees. 8 (below). *Heterospathe phillipsii* is a slender, moderate, pinnate-leaved palm.



After saying thanks and goodbye to our Fijian guides, Masi and I returned to the road and headed east from Nadarivatu toward Monasavu Dam into what was for me uncharted territory. In the middle 1970s the road ended not too far east of Nadarivatu, and only a foot track continued across the center of Viti Levu. The construction of Monasavu Dam in the 1980s pushed a road through to the dam site and then down the eastern escarpment of Viti Levu to Suva. The unpaved road was of poor quality, muddy, with standing pools of water and deep ruts, but with careful driving we were able to negotiate its treacherous meanderings. Our goals at Monasavu Dam were *Clinostigma exorrhizum* and *Physokentia petiolata*, which Masi knew were along an access road to the dam.

When we arrived at the dam late in the afternoon, again under threatening skies, the work and guard stations were deserted, and, unfortunately, we needed a key to access the road to the dam. Under a heavy drizzle we waited in the car, chatting, reading, and snacking until dusk approached. With much disappointment we finally gave up and decided to continue on to Suva. Just as we were departing some workers arrived and unlocked the gate for us. However, because it was so late, darkness was fast approaching, and we still had several hours of rough travel remaining, we made arrangements to return to





Monasavu Dam in several weeks at the end of my Fijian sojourn.

The remaining drive down the eastern escarpment to Suva was an unforgettable experience. Somewhat disappointed from our temporary failure at the dam, and cold, wet, hungry, and with only the weak lights of our vehicle showing the way, we continued on in what seemed like a never-ending, bone-jarring, downward spiral into darkness. Finally, after what seemed like weeks but was really only four hours, the welcoming lights of Suva appeared in the distance. I dropped Masi off at his home, drove to my hotel, showered, ate and then collapsed into bed after 20 hours of no sleep but with contented visions of Big Leaf in my mind.

Masi and I spent the next three days on trips around the greater Suva area looking for palms. On October 2 in the morning we visited Colo-i-Suva Forest Park, a well known, traditional and long-popular locale for palms just a few minutes outside of Suva, where we observed and photographed *Balaka microcarpa* and *Veitchia vitiensis*. The latter is a moderate to tall, very slender palm with gracefully spreading, pinnate leaves (Fig. 4), a well developed and conspicuously mottled crownshaft, and small, bright red fruits.

After lunch we headed to Naquali in the Rewa River valley to see *Neoveitchia storckii*,

9 (above). *Metroxylon vitiense* typically grows in low, wet, sometimes swampy land. 10 (below). *Veitchia filifera* is a slender, moderately tall, mostly understory palm with distinctly ascending, pinnate leaves.







11 (left). The dark green, nearly black crownshaft of *Veitchia filifera* complements the whitish trunk. 12 (right). *Physokentia thurstonii* is a small to moderate, understory, stilt-root palm with a bright green, prominently and closely ringed trunk, and conspicuous, swollen, grayish crownshaft.

*Metroxylon vitiense* and *Calamus vitiensis*. Although we would see the last two species elsewhere in Fiji, it was our only opportunity to see *N. storckii* because of its restricted distribution, so we allocated several hours to explore wet, muddy, highly disturbed forest in search of this handsome palm. With long, spreading, pinnate leaves, *N. storckii* is a large palm (Fig. 5) and has whitish inflorescences that contrast nicely with the poorly developed but black crownshaft (Fig. 6). The bright red fruits are large and showy, adding to the palm's handsome nature. Unfortunately, there is little regeneration in this disturbed site, which is much the same in the other, highly restricted sites where *Neoveitchia storckii* occurs, and thus making it an endangered species. Later in the afternoon on the return to Suva we stopped along the road to Mt. Nakabalevu, where we again saw *Balaka microcarpa* and *Veitchia vitiensis*.

On the morning of October 3 Masi and I headed west from Suva along the southern coastal route to Nadi. At the small settlement at Naboutini we turned north or inland into the mountains along a dirt road to Nabukelevu

to visit the unnamed and highly endangered, pinnate-leaved species of *Cyphosperma*, heretofore known only from and by its location, Naboutini. (For a complete and illustrated account of this new species see Hodel and Marcus, in this issue). In some ways it was like a pinnate-leaved version of Big Leaf but differed in its larger habit and lower, somewhat drier habitat. In the area we also saw scattered individuals of *Veitchia joannis* poking their canopies high above the surrounding vegetation.

We returned to the main southern coastal road around Viti Levu and drove to Galoa, where once again we turned inland or north into the mountains, this time on the road to Waibogi. In a short while we encountered vast stands of the splendid *Hydriastele vitiensis*, which covered valleys, slopes, and ridges, thrusting its spectacular canopy of arching, slightly recurved, pinnate leaves well above the forest trees (Fig. 7). A tall palm, *H. vitiensis* has a well developed, brownish white, slightly swollen crownshaft and broom-like inflorescences. Strangely, this abundant, conspicuous, and relatively easy-to-access palm was only

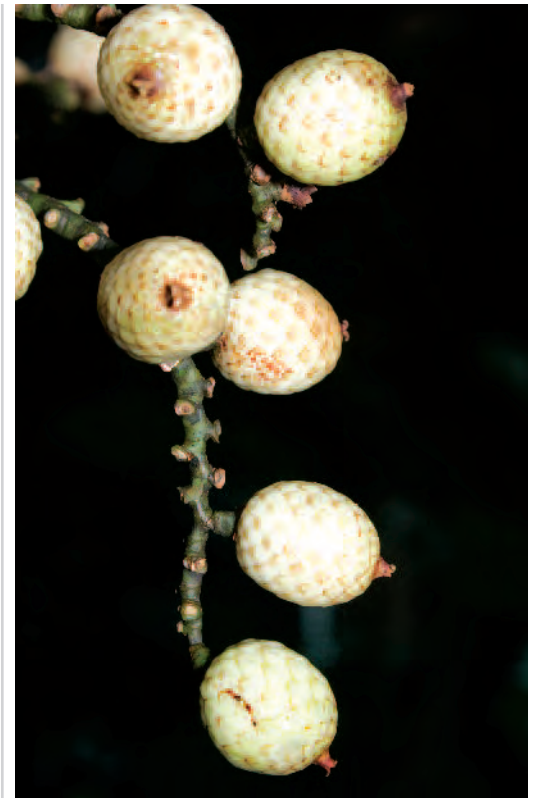


13 (above left). *Calamus vitiensis* is a climbing rattan. 14 (above right). Leaf bases of *C. vitiensis* are densely spiny. 15 (below). The handsome fruits of *C. vitiensis* are small, white, and densely covered with scales.

discovered in the late 1970s and named in 1982 as *Gulubia vitiensis*. *Balaka longirostris* and *Veitchia vitiensis* grew nearby in the forest understory, completing our palm adventures for the day.

October 4 found Masi and me again along the southern coastal route to Nadi, this time turning north or inland into the mountains at Nabukavesi on a well maintained but dirt road to Namosi. *Veitchia vitiensis* was again common in this wet and intriguing forest, and we also encountered an unusual, and at that time, unnamed species of *Balaka*, commonly but erroneously referred to as *B. macrocarpa*. In my synopsis of *Balaka*, which I referred to earlier, I named this species *B. diffusa*.

Returning to the southern coastal route, we drove to Navua, where we once again turned off the main road to the north into the low hills on a poorly maintained dirt road to Nakavu Village. Here we found, in highly disturbed forest thick with invasive vines, *Heterospatha phillipsii*, named in 1997 in honor of the late Dick Phillips. A slender, moderate, pinnate-leaved palm (Fig. 8), *H. phillipsii* lacks a crownshaft and typically carries many, much





branched infructescences arising from among the leaf bases and holding the small, bright red fruits.

With several hours of daylight remaining, we returned to Suva and visited the nearby Rewa River delta area, where we photographed nice stands of *Metroxylon vitiense* (Fig. 9) and *Veitchia joannis* growing in low, wet, sometimes swampy land. Both are tall palms with pinnate leaves, and the robust *M. vitiense*, upon reaching maturity, sends forth inflorescences from the top and center of the canopy, thus signaling the end of the life of the palm. Like all *Metroxylon*, the large, handsome fruits of this species are covered with attractive, shiny scales. *Veitchia joannis*, which unlike *Metroxylon*, has a distinct and well developed crownshaft below which are the dense, much branched infructescences with large, red fruits, has a slender trunk and arching pinnate leaves.

On the morning of October 5 Masi and I flew to Vanua Levu Island and landed near Savusavu, where we met up with Jim Valentine, an Australian who has a nursery and landscape business in an idyllic setting

overlooking picturesque Savusavu Bay. Jim would accompany us in our palm exploration on Vanua Levu and Taveuni and generously provided the use of his 4-wheel drive pick up truck. We drove straight to Lambasa on the north side of Vanua Levu, and after settling into our hotel, we ate lunch and planned our activities for the next several days.

The morning of October 6 dawned overcast with the threat of rain but, nonetheless, we drove south from Lambasa, navigating a labyrinth of confusing dirt roads, toward Matani Creek and the track up Mt. Sorolevu, an exciting area for palms with no fewer than five genera and seven species present, including the mostly understory *Veitchia filifera* and *Balaka* "Bulitavu," *B. seemannii* and *B. streptostachys* at lower elevations and the larger *Clinostigma exorrhizum*, *Heterospatha longipes* and *Hydriastele vitiensis* higher up.

The main objective on Mt. Sorolevu was to see *Balaka* "Bulitavu" and determine its proper taxonomic status and correct name. In a steady rain we drove as far as we could up the Mt. Sorolevu track before an immense, ugly

16 (left). *Cyphosperma trichospadix* is a small to moderate, mostly understory palm with a slender, closely and conspicuously ringed trunk and pinnate leaves. 17 (right). A tall, emergent species, *Clinostigma exorrhizum* has a stunning canopy of long, pinnate leaves with numerous, slender, elegantly pendulous pinnae.





washout abruptly terminated our ascent. Jim and Masi, who had visited the area previously, had been able to drive much farther up Mt. Sorolevu but today our fate was to walk some distance in the steady rain before entering the forest to explore for palms. The rain increased to a torrential downpour, forcing me on several occasions to stand under an umbrella for five to ten minutes at a time, camera and note pad patiently in hand, waiting for the slightest break in the rain to snap a few photos. Fortunately, our persistence under the most deplorable conditions enabled me to gather some good photos and determine that *B. "Bulitavu"* was actually *B. macrocarpa*. Although we saw a few juvenile *Heterospathe longipes*, the deteriorating conditions and continued heavy rain dampened our enthusiasm for exploring higher up on Mt. Sorolevu to see *Clinostigma exorrhizum* and *Hydriastele vitiensis*, species that we had already seen or would see in other areas, so we returned to the truck and made our descent toward Lambasa.

Farther down Mt. Sorolevu the rain let up and we stopped to observe the widespread and variable *Balaka seemannii* and *Veitchia filifera*, the latter a slender, moderately tall, mostly understory palm with a whitish to brown trunk, distinctly ascending, pinnate leaves (Fig. 10), and a dark green, nearly black crownshaft (Fig. 11). The relatively large, spreading



18 (above). *Veitchia simulans* is a moderate to tall, slender, mostly understory palm with a brownish, closely ringed trunk, a dark green, slightly mottled crownshaft, and canopy of spreading, pinnate leaves. 19 (below). In contrast to the other small, mostly understory *Veitchia* we had encountered so far, *Veitchia simulans* had unusually large fruits.







20 (left). *Hydriastele boumae* differs from *H. vitiensis* in the manner in which it retains large, undivided or few-split leaves nearly to maturity, up until it begins to emerge above the forest canopy, as here with Masi, who provides scale. 21 (right). *Heterospatha longipes* is a moderate understory palm with a slender, brownish, closely ringed trunk and canopy of spreading, pinnate leaves.

infructescences held the full size but not yet red-orange, ripe fruits.

On October 7 Jim, Masi, and I left Lambasa under bright, sunny skies and returned to Savusavu, stopping at Waisali Rainforest Reserve to see *Balaka seemannii* and *Physokentia thurstonii*, the latter a small to moderate, understory, stilt-root palm with a bright green, prominently and closely ringed trunk, conspicuous, swollen, grayish crownshaft (Fig. 12), whitish inflorescence, and curiously sculptured seeds. Stilt-root palms have always held a special fascination for me, so to see and photograph *P. thurstonii* was an exciting experience despite the dense vegetation making photography difficult. Closer to Savusavu we stopped briefly to observe a large stand of *Metroxylon vitiense* in low, wet, swampy land.

After Masi and I settled into our hotel in Savusavu, we ate lunch and visited Jim's house and nursery, admiring the many fine plants he was growing for landscaping, including

numerous palms. Over dinner we discussed plans for our last day on Vanua Levu, a trip to Natewa Peninsula to see the unusual *Balaka* "Natewa" that carried large, nearly simple, undivided leaves not just in a juvenile state but nearly to maturity. I suspected this could be *B. macrocarpa* because this species was originally collected in the area.

October 8 was a bright and sunny day as we headed out southeast from Savusavu onto the Natewa Peninsula. We stopped at several places to observe and photograph *Veitchia filifera* and then found a small hill abundant with what was popularly known as *B.* "Natewa" but, which now upon examination, I could confirm it was, indeed, *B. macrocarpa* as we had seen also on Mt. Sorolevu. This Natewa population, though, was intriguing in how it carried the large, mostly undivided leaves nearly to flowering and fruiting.

Upon returning to Savusavu we learned the disturbing news that one of the two Fijian inter-island airlines that was to fly Masi and me



from Taveuni back to Suva and then on to the Southern Lau group to see *Pritchardia thurstonii* had temporarily shut down service, forcing us hurriedly to purchase new tickets on the remaining interisland airline from Taveuni to Suva. Unfortunately, this airline did not fly to the Southern Lau group, putting in jeopardy our plans to visit those islands and see *P. thurstonii*.

We departed Savusavu on the morning of October 9, again heading onto the Natewa Peninsula, but this time to catch the ferry to take us and Jim's truck across the narrow strait to Taveuni Island. After a one-hour ferry ride we landed on Taveuni and drove to Somosomo, purchased food for the next several days and then settled into our rather spartan accommodations.

Although Taveuni promised to be an exciting island for palms, our enthusiasm was somewhat tempered by the wet conditions we had encountered on Vanua Levu. Taveuni is even wetter than Vanua Levu, with some places receiving over nine meters of rain annually! Fortunately, we had three, mostly sunny days on Taveuni, making our stay there a productive and enjoyable time.

I was especially full of excited anticipation on October 10 as we walked up the trail from Somosomo to the Crater Lakes, long a classical and fabled locale with a rich assemblage of palms, including *Balaka seemannii*, *Calamus vitiensis*, *Clinostigma exorrhizum*, *Cyphosperma trichospadix*, *Physokentia thurstonii* and *Veitchia simulans*. On this sunny day the forest was breathtaking, vibrant and exuberant with a rich mixture of palms, shrubs, and trees, many supporting a rich and heavy load of epiphytic mosses, ferns, orchids and aroids. The first palm we encounter was the spiny, climbing rattan *C. vitiensis* (Figs. 13–15), which seemed well adapted to survival in lower, open, disturbed areas as well as in mostly undisturbed forest. Its small, scaly, whitish fruits were unusually attractive (Fig. 15). Again, the widespread and variable understory *B. seemannii* was in abundance and was especially conspicuous with open clusters of showy, red fruits. Farther on in the forest we soon encountered the stilt-rooted *Physokentia thurstonii*, which we had seen earlier on Vanua Levu, and *Cyphosperma trichospadix*, a small to moderate, mostly understory palm with a slender, closely and conspicuously ringed trunk and pinnate leaves (Fig. 16). A more diminutive palm than *C. naboutinense* and

22. The especially showy and fragrant, bright red fruits of *Heterospatha longipes* are held on short infructescences that arise from among the deeply split leaf bases.





23. Before weathering away, trunks of *Clinostigma exorrhizum* are covered with white, powdery wax.

even *C. tanga*, it nonetheless has the same deeply split, green leaf bases that do not form a crownshaft and from which the few branched inflorescences arise.

A little farther on we began to see *Clinostigma exorrhizum*, a tall, emergent species with an attractive, smooth but ringed, whitish green to brown trunk supported on a cone of thick, robust stilt roots, a well developed elongate, greenish crownshaft, and a stunning canopy of long, pinnate leaves with numerous, slender, elegantly pendulous pinnae (Fig. 17). Many short-branched inflorescences in all stages of flower and fruit were held just below the crownshaft and were particularly showy when heavily laden with small, red fruits.

As we made our late-afternoon return down the trail to Somosomo, we stopped to admire and photograph *Veitchia simulans*, a rather shy, moderate to tall, slender, mostly understory

palm with a brownish, closely ringed trunk, a dark green, slightly mottled crownshaft, and canopy of spreading, pinnate leaves (Fig. 18). In contrast to the other small, mostly understory *Veitchia* we had encountered so far, this species had unusually large fruits although not as large as those of *V. joannis* (Fig. 19).

On October 11 we drove to the southeast side of Taveuni to make a trek into the Vidawa Rain Forest Walk, reputed to be one of the wettest places in Fiji, but that featured many fine palms, including *Balaka seemannii*, *Calamus vitiensis*, *Heterospathe longipes*, *Hydriastele boumae* and *Veitchia filifera*. With sunny, cooperative weather, we checked in at the park's headquarters, paid our entrance fee and hired the required Fijian guide to take us up into the forest. The first palm we encountered and the most abundant and widespread was *H. boumae*, which, like its close relative on Vanua Levu and Viti Levu, *H. vitiensis*, was an emergent species with a tall, brownish trunk, conspicuous, swollen, whitish crownshaft, canopy of arching, recurved, pinnate leaves, and broom-like inflorescences (Back Cover). Its most unusual but striking feature, and one of its distinguishing characters, was the manner in which it retained large, undivided or few-split leaves nearly to maturity, up until it began to emerge above the forest canopy (Fig. 20).

*Heterospathe longipes*, a moderate understory palm with a slender, brownish, closely ringed trunk and canopy of spreading, pinnate leaves, was locally common (Fig. 21). It has deeply split leaf bases that do not form a crownshaft but from which the relatively short, heavy, few branched inflorescences arise. These hold the whitish staminate and pistillate flowers and later the large, especially showy and fragrant, red fruits (Fig. 22). Unfortunately, many of the leaves showed extensive and severe skeletonizing from an unknown pest.

Our last day on Taveuni, October 12, was spent along the road to the summit of Des Voeux Peak, another traditional locale for palms. Under foggy but not rainy conditions we observed many fine specimens of *Clinostigma exorrhizum*, and here the cone of stilt roots, which supported the handsome, greenish brown, ringed trunk with a heavy, white waxy glaucous covering (Fig. 23), was unusually well developed (Fig. 24). On some individuals the cone of stilt roots reached nearly two meters up the trunk and spread for well over two meters at the base. The large, thick, robust



roots emerged bright orange, their enlarged tips capped with a mossy glove, before aging to the more common brown. Close by were a few specimens of *Veitchia simulans*, a species that we had seen several days earlier on the trail from Somosomo to Crater Lakes. As we descended Des Voeux Peak the rain began in earnest and we felt fortunate to have had three days of mostly fine weather in one of Fiji's rainiest places.

On October 13 Masi and I said our good byes and thanks to Jim for his admirable companionship and help in the field, and we boarded our plane for the flight back to Suva. Upon arrival in Suva we immediately and persistently tried to make new arrangements to travel to the Southern Lau group to see *Pritchardia thurstonii*. Unfortunately, it became increasingly clear that a trip to the Southern Lau group was impossible to arrange for the last few days of my Fijian stay and, with much disappointment, I realized my sojourn to see *P. thurstonii* would have to wait for another time.

I spent my extra days in Suva wisely, examining *Balaka* and *Cyphosperma* specimens

at the herbarium at the University of the South Pacific and, with Masi, visiting public and private gardens to see cultivated specimens of exotic and Fijian palms. The Thurston Gardens in Fiji contained many fine specimens of Fijian and other Pacific Island palms, many planted by the late Dick Phillips, including mature, fruiting *Carpoxyton macrospermum*, various *Veitchia*, and the Melanesian form (small-fruited) of *Pelagodoxa henryana*. Another fine collection of palms is in the small botanical gardens of the University of the South Pacific, and several places on the campus had fruiting Fijian palms, including *Heterospathe phillipsii*, *Neoveitchia storckii* and various *Veitchia*. Dick Watling, author of the exceedingly handsome *Palms of the Fiji Islands*, has perhaps the finest collection of Fijian palms, including several notably specimens of *Balaka*, *Heterospathe longipes*, *H. phillipsii*, *Metroxylon vitiense*, *Neoveitchia storckii* and various *Veitchia*.

One day I spent with Marika Tuiwawa, director and curator of the herbarium at the University of the South Pacific, traveling to the west on the southern coastal route towards Nadi, stopping at a few places around Pacific

24. Masi provides scale for this exceptional cone of orange stilt roots supporting the trunk of this *Clinostigma exorrhizum*. Note the root tips clad in their mossy "gloves."





25. The conspicuous, rose-colored inflorescence of *Physokentia petiolata* distinguishes it from *P. thurstonii*.

Harbour to see *Metroxylon vitiensis* and the widespread and variable *Balaka longirostris* and then visiting Robbie Stone's superb collection of exotic and Fijian palms, many received from the late Dick Phillips.

My stay in Fiji was fast approaching its final days, and on October 18 Masi and I planned once again to traverse the center of Viti Levu from Suva to Nadi to return to Monasavu Dam to see *Clinostigma exorrhizum* and *Physokentia petiolata* before my late night departure to Los Angeles on October 19. Around midnight on October 17 I was awakened by a strong, steady rain, which by morning had turned into a torrential downpour, easily one of the heaviest rains I had ever experienced. I was sure that our trip through the center of Viti Levu would have to be cancelled and I would be returning to Los Angeles without seeing all the palms I had intended to see. However, when Masi arrived at the hotel early in the morning of October 18 he assured me that we should still make an attempt across the center of Viti Levu! I was stunned and much less confident than Masi, but nonetheless, we set out in a driving rain, negotiating flooded streets as we made our way through a nearly deserted Suva, heading for the road to Monasavu Dam in the

center of Viti Levu. Easily the scariest point of the trip was when we had to cross a raging tributary of the Rewa River. The brown, swiftly moving water was actually slightly lapping over the top of a narrow, one-lane bridge about 50 meters long. I hesitated before crossing but Masi assured me it was safe, so off we went, and I gave a huge sigh of relief when we reached the other side. Later we learned that the bridge had to be closed because of rising water.

Our troubles were not over, though, because on several occasions we had to traverse long, deep pools of water in the heavily rutted road and on more than one occasion water rose so high that it came inside the cab of our vehicle, flooding the floor. The rain continued as we made our way up the switchbacks of the eastern escarpment of Viti Levu. The mountain seemed to be oozing water, for at nearly every turn of a switchback a raging, roaring torrent was gushing forth from the mountain and tumbling over rocks into the rainy, misty, unseen depths below. As we neared the top of the switchbacks the rain ceased abruptly and we were greeted with leaden, overcast, drizzling skies. Once the sun even tried to fight its way through the clouds, and we stopped to



admire several handsome *Veitchia joannis* with heavy, elegantly pendulous pinnae (Front Cover) before continuing on to Monasavu Dam.

At the dam we gained admission to the access road and Masi quickly guided me right to *Physokentia petiolata*, a small, understory, stilt-rooted palm that differed from *P. thurstonii* in its striking, rose-colored inflorescences (Fig. 25). Although the dense, thick vegetation was dripping wet, we lingered, taking photographs and notes, admiring this palm and its cool, mossy, mountain habitat for some time. We had to push on, though, so we drove farther along the access road, finally stopping to view an extensive population of *Clinostigma exorrhizum*. I took more photographs but time was calling and we turned around and headed back to the main road and continued our cross-island trek, arriving in Nadi late in the afternoon.

The next morning I said my heartfelt thanks and goodbyes to Masi, who returned to Suva via bus, and I spent the day touring the grounds of the Garden of the Sleeping Giant just north of Nadi. A superb garden, it contains fine, mature specimens of exotic and Fijian palms, many that Dick Phillips provided. My

time in the garden was relaxing and made for a perfect end to my nearly three-week sojourn in which I was fortunate to observe all but one of Fiji's native palm species. Seeing *Pritchardia thurstonii* in the Southern Lau group, now becoming a life-long quest, would have to wait for another trip.

#### Acknowledgments

The International Palm Society and Audrey and Philip Keeler supported my travel to Fiji. Jim Valentine and especially Sakiusa Masitoqui were admirable companions in the field, helping to locate palms more easily and rapidly and making for a most enjoyable time. Marika Tuiwawa facilitated my studies in the herbarium at the University of the South Pacific (SUVA) and accompanied me on one short field trip and to see Robbie Stone's garden. Robbie Stone and Dick Watling graciously opened their fine gardens to me. The staff at the Garden of the Sleeping Giant generously shared their garden with me, even permitting me after-hours access. All have my sincere thanks.

#### LITERATURE CITED

HODEL, D.R. 2010. A synopsis of the genus *Balaka*. *Palms* 54: 161–188.