

LETTER TO THE EDITORS

17 July 2008

To the Editors:

I have read "Time Bombs in Gardens: Invasive Palms in Tropical Islands, with Emphasis on French Polynesia (Pacific Ocean) and the Mascarenes (Indian Ocean)" in the June, 2008 issue of PALMS. I am troubled by its content, though not in the way the authors might have intended. Accepting the article's logic means, I think, an end to palm collecting and a serious reduction or complete elimination of the collections of botanical gardens. An eventual incidental casualty might well be the International Palm Society (though perhaps its journal might be retained as a forum for taxonomists). While everything in the article pertains to palms on islands, everything in the article applies almost as readily to mainland gardens, personal or institutional.

I have more than 100 palms of 70+ species growing in my half-acre lot in Vero Beach, Florida (USDA Zone 9B, or possibly once again 10A). I have been collecting palms for nearly 30 years, the same length of time I have belonged to the IPS. I also belong to Central Florida Palm & Cycad Society and remain a longtime member of the Florida Native Plant Society. I am fully aware of major plant pests in Florida; several palm species are listed as potential pests but are little more than nuisances easily dealt with.

While the article outlines the problems that exotic palms present to the native ecology in the Mascarene Islands and in French Polynesia, its implications extend much further. The article's basic premise (though unobtrusively qualified) is that all exotic palms are actually or potentially "bad." I realize that banning exotics is a very hot, trendy topic in quite a few places around the world; the article's viewpoint is the epitome of political correctness.

Just about all palms in favorable circumstances can produce viable seed. If there are volunteers, these can become a "threat" to the native ecology. Does this mean that the volunteers under my big *Livistona saribus* should be reported as "locally naturalized"? When would this become a bigger problem? When some volunteers appear in a neighbor's yard? Of course, I live in an essentially suburban area in which the native ecology has been mostly bulldozed. Nature, however defined, is at least 10 miles away.

I find disturbing that in the article the terms "locally naturalized" and "widely naturalized" are nowhere defined. I do understand that this is a survey of literature and, thus, very general. But, still, no real definitions of crucial terms.

In many tropical areas, farmers are energetically putting to extinction native species through slash-and-burn agriculture. Thus, there may be little left other than a thoroughly despoiled natural habitat. Botanical gardens have saved some palm species from complete extinction and, with distribution of seed, have secured the longer term survival of these species.

The botanical garden on Mauritius is reported to be a major source of the spread of exotic palm species. Native palm species are noted as threatened, some near extinction. Has human agriculture had nothing to do with their plight? The article establishes no such cause-and-effect. By implication exotic palms, originating in the botanical garden, are the only threat though nowhere is this directly stated. Anyone accepting the innuendo must then look for a solution. One very obvious answer is to remove the exotic palms as a source and to prevent the importation of seed for species not currently grown. Applied to Miami, that might mean that Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden and Montgomery Botanical Center should eliminate their palm collections as a potential source of damage to the ecology of Miami-Dade County.

A proposal last year in New Zealand to ban the popular *Archontophoenix cunninghamiana* would initially have required that homeowners remove these palms at their own expense. Opponents pointed out that the palm volunteered in "disturbed" habitats, such as urban and suburban landscapes, that it nowhere had been shown to survive in native habitat. The proposal has been tabled, not dropped, and it has been suspected that the ban was proposed without any supporting evidence, the conclusion being foregone.

The necessity of a ban on exotic species is so self-evident to its advocates that empirical data may not be required to prove the case.

The article suggests that the invasive propensity of any new exotic palm species be carefully monitored before their entry is permitted elsewhere. Not a bad idea, however, who is to do the monitoring, at whose expense, for how long? Much easier and cheaper just to ban.

I would hope that the IPS hold a watching brief on any such proposals, wherever these might appear. Otherwise, I suppose that I should be content with growing only the 11 species of palms native to Florida after destroying all my exotics lest these subvert the native ecology and citrus groves of Central Florida.

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