



## NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF PALMS

Caracas, Venezuela, is seeing yet another outbreak of the larvae of a butterfly, *Brassolis sophorae* (Nymphalidae). The caterpillars of this species are large, up to 10 cm long, and forage gregariously at dawn and dusk, feeding on a large number of palm species, both native and exotic. The palm most often attacked in Caracas is the native *Roystonea oleracea*, and March and October are the months when the damage is most severe. The areas hardest hit in the city include Chuao, La Trinidad and Las Mercedes, along with Parque del Este, home to more than 1000 *Roystonea oleracea* palms. This pest is harmless to humans, but the voracious larvae can have a devastating effect on palms, defoliating even large palms over the course of a few nights. *Brassolis sophorae* has become a recognized pest of coconut and African oil palm plantations in the region. In Caracas, the periodic plagues of caterpillars are thought to be brought on by a decline in its natural enemies, namely yellow-jacket wasps and the bird *Molothrus bonariensis*. The cause for the decline in both of these predators is believed to be the insecticides used to control the mosquitoes that spread dengue fever. The situation in Caracas is a lesson in the delicate balance between predator and prey, the interconnectedness within the natural world and the tragic, unforeseen consequences of widespread pesticide use.

On the last weekend in April, the ninth annual meeting of EUNOPS (European Network of Palm Scientists) was held in The Royal Botanic Gardens Kew. Attended by 48 people, the meeting provided 22 presentations on many aspects of palms, from structural botany, evolution and classification through to

economics and floristics. For the first time there was a contingent from Russia, with five staff members of Moscow University and the Moscow Botanic Gardens. In one particularly important and interesting session, progress in the development of the Palmweb website was presented and discussed. This website, supported by funding from the European Union, aims to disseminate critically compiled taxonomic information on the web. Ultimately it should be the most reliable first port of call for palm-related taxonomic enquiries on the world wide web ([www.palmweb.org](http://www.palmweb.org)). The site uses the online World Checklist of Palms as its nomenclatural base, to which are added protologues (first descriptions) and further taxonomic information and maps. Currently the site is still very much under development, but the compilers hope very soon to upload a large number of critically identified photographs to the site. EUNOPS 10 will be held in Montpellier, coinciding with Palms 2010, an international palm symposium.

News has just arrived that on May 23rd, The International Institute for Species Exploration at Arizona State University and an international committee of taxonomists selected *Tahina spectabilis* as one of the top ten new species of all organisms to be described during 2008. Readers of Palms will need little persuading that *Tahina* is a very special palm, but it is wonderful that it is recognized by the international scientific community as one of the top ten most charismatic new species. Further details can be found at [www.species.asu.edu/Top10](http://www.species.asu.edu/Top10).

THE EDITORS