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Sabal Palmetto Naturalized in Western Louisiana

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The cabbage palm, *Sabal palmetto*, has been discovered well-established in several localities near Lake Charles and the Calcasieu River in Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana. A group of palms, estimated at more than 200 plants (numerous seedlings, young plants, and several mature trees), occurs just east of the Calcasieu River near the base of the Interstate Highway 10 (I-10) bridge over the Calcasieu River. This population is located along an approximately ¾-mile long portion of the frontage road and an adjacent railroad north of I-10.

The largest population of *S. palmetto* occurs in a wooded area about ¼ mile directly north of I-10. Here several large specimens can be seen growing along the distant wooded shoreline. All of these groups of palms are near one another and visible from the I-10 bridge over the Calcasieu River. In addition to those in the forest and along the railroad, some palms also occur on a small elevated island in a marshland adjacent to the railroad, where they grow side by side with *Taxodium distichum*. There are no palms in the open marshy area.

Exploration of the wooded area on February 6, 1995, revealed an extensive population of tall, mature palms and numerous medium-sized juveniles. The size and height of the palms, some more than 18 feet tall, and their wide spatial distribution in the wooded area, suggest that the population is an old one. The tallest specimens are perhaps 30 years old, the smaller juveniles are at least six years old. Curiously, neither seedlings nor very young plants were observed throughout the woodland site, despite the fact that many of the palms were in full fruit. The Louisiana population of *S. palmetto* is documented by Landry *et al.*, 2 April 1996 (LAF).

The long but narrow wooded area containing this population of cabbage palms was formerly the city dump for the community of Lake Charles. The woods are strewn with mounds of refuse, covered by several decades of leaf litter. The soil

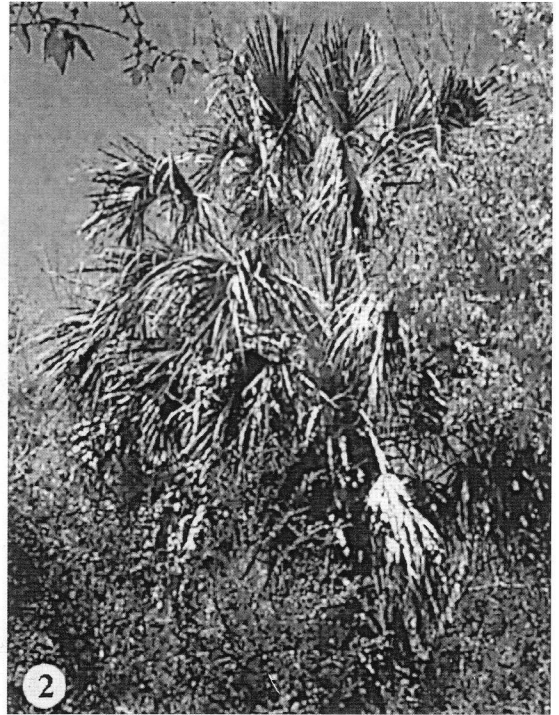
is very loose and spongy, no doubt due to successive layers of refuse. Bottles and old rubber tires are everywhere. The woodland vegetation is characteristic of a disturbed habitat. The dominant trees are *Celtis laevigata* and *Quercus nigra*. The dominant shrubs are *Ligustrum lucidum*, *L. sinense*, *Myrica cerifera*, and *Sambucus canadensis*. Most of the forest floor is sparsely vegetated. *Rubus* is not uncommon, apparently a remnant of a more open canopy.

Sabal minor, the native palmetto, appears to be absent from the woods containing *S. palmetto*, whereas only a few hundred yards farther down the road in a sandy pine forest, *S. minor* is quite common and *S. palmetto* is absent.

Another location, containing two tall, mature palms, was discovered on the southern side of I-10 at the base of the Calcasieu River bridge on the western side of the river. These palms are growing at the edge of an isolated wooded area. cursory observations from the roadway failed to reveal additional palms at this site. The area is privately owned and has not yet been fully explored. A single juvenile palm was discovered growing along the railroad track on the west side of the Calcasieu River beneath the I-10 bridge.

Sabal palmetto was previously reported in Louisiana (Thomas and Allen 1993) from Orleans Parish (NO-Darwin 1903), St. Charles Parish (NO-Montz 5166), and Richland Parish (LAF-Thieret 30091). Upon examination of the last specimen we conclude that it is not *S. palmetto* but rather *S. minor*. The other two collections probably represent escapes from cultivation in the New Orleans area, which has an extensive cultivated palm flora. The range of *S. palmetto* otherwise extends from southeastern North Carolina to the Florida Panhandle; it also occurs in Cuba and the Bahamas.

The origin of the Calcasieu Parish cabbage palms is undoubtedly a large group of cultivated plants that is growing along a stretch of man-made beach on the north shore of Lake Charles on the south



1-2. Representative specimens of *Sabal palmetto* naturalized near Lake Charles, Louisiana. Scale approximately 1:67.

side of I-10. These palms were planted in the 1960s when the lakeside recreation area was developed. Ironically, the cultivated palms do not appear to be faring as well as their progeny. Over the years many of them have died and there are no volunteers at the beach site.

Dispersal of the seeds of cabbage palm can be attributed perhaps to birds, considering the one-mile distance between the cultivated palms and the established ones. The absence of very young seedlings in the forested location further suggests that predators, perhaps birds and small mammals, must consume the numerous fruits. Regardless, considering the number of adult and juvenile palms

and their current distribution over such a large area, *S. palmetto* appears to be well-established in the area. However, there is little evidence to suggest that it might spread appreciably beyond its current range or have any adverse effect on the native vegetation. If left alone the cabbage palm will no doubt continue to thrive as a unique part of the local flora along the Calcasieu River.

LITERATURE CITED

- THOMAS, R. D. AND C. M. ALLEN. 1993. Atlas of the vascular flora of Louisiana. The Nature Conservancy, Louisiana Field Office, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA.

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