
Field Guide to the Rattans of Africa. Terry Sunderland. Kew: Royal Botanic Gardens. 2007. 66 pp. ISBN 978 1 84246 180 8. £20 (hardback).
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Rattans are climbing palms belonging to the subfamily *Calamoideae* and are found in the Old World tropics of Africa and Asia. Counterparts in the New World are the climbing species of *Desmoncus* belonging to the subfamily *Arecoideae*. Having worked on rattans in East Kalimantan, Indonesia – and more recently being based for several years in Gabon and hunting palms there as well – I was delighted when asked to review this field guide.

Whereas the traditional use of rattan in Southeast Asia is well documented and commercial exploitation goes back to the mid-nineteenth century, these issues are poorly documented as far as Africa is concerned. Activities within the framework of the African Rattan Research Programme have helped to bridge the knowledge gap between Southeast Asia and Africa.

This field guide is a user-friendly, beautifully illustrated adaptation of the taxonomical part of the author's PhD thesis (Sunderland, 2000). The bulk of taxonomical problems having been solved in the PhD thesis, we now have a splendid aid to identify the African rattans. The nomenclatorial section at the end of the book provides the link with names used in previous books on palms of Africa.

The *Field Guide to the Rattans of Africa* is the first identification aid for the rattans of the entire continent. The introductory part of the field guide gives a good overview of what rattan is all about in Africa. It provides some general information on ecology and distribution, uses and the complexity of local names. The descriptive notes are most useful for the understanding of the species descriptions, and the guide to collecting good herbarium specimens is very well written. The main body of the text comprises the keys to genera and species and the descriptions of the 22 species. Every species account consists of a description with notes on uses, conservation status, habitat, distribution and vernacular names. A distribution map, a botanical line drawing and numerous photographs illustrate the descriptions. Despite the author's fieldwork for numerous years some enigmas remain as five species have so far never been collected in flower or fruit (*Eremospatha dransfieldii*, *E. quinquecostulata*, *E. tessmanniana*, *Laccosperma korupensis* and *Oncocalamus wrightianus*) and there is still one *Eremospatha* puzzle for Gabon.

If we compare this field guide with the field guide to the rattans of the Lao PDR (Evans *et al.*, 2001) some striking differences are revealed. The scope is clearly different – the Lao guide has to cover 51 species, while for Africa just 22 species have to be keyed out. The field guide for Africa, with its limited number of species, uses a traditional dichotomous key, while the Lao one employs various field keys necessitated by the higher number of species. In the African field guide a plant description and a high-resolution botanical drawing accompany the species accounts, whereas in the Lao field guide a species account is provided with simplified drawings with a descriptive text. The descriptive notes in the African field guide are

written and not illustrated, therefore a higher level of basic knowledge is assumed in the reader.

The palm treatments most commonly used to identify rattans in Africa were the Flora of West Tropical Africa account (Russell, 1968) and the Flora of Tropical Africa account (Wright, 1902). However, these books did not work satisfactorily, especially for rattans in Central Africa where species diversity is greatest. As ecological requirements and the socio-economic context of their uses vary with the species, proper identification is a prerequisite for sustainable management of the rattan resource. The present field guide provides an excellent aid to identify African rattans both in the field and in the herbarium. The book is much more than just a tool for plant taxonomists. It is a beautifully illustrated invaluable resource for all with an interest in the economic botany of the tropical forests of Africa.

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