

Vietnam's *Freakin' Livistona*

Article and photos by Michael Lock, Mountain View, CA (mikelock@sbcglobal.net)

One of the most surprising developments in the world of palms is the rate at which new species continue to be discovered in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries. And we are not just talking about miniature palmlets with obscure anatomical idiosyncrasies that only a botanist could appreciate, or species that arise from a reshuffling of the taxonomic deck, but impressive and flamboyant trees guaranteed to elevate the heart rate of any palm lover. The most well-known example is probably *Tahina spectabilis* from Madagascar, which sports a 20 foot tall Christmas tree-shaped inflorescence rising straight out of the top of the tree, and has a crown big enough to be seen in satellite pictures on Google Earth. But there have been other great finds as well, including *Licuala bachmaensis* with stiff, pinwheel leaves up to 4 feet wide and flower stalks more than 10 feet long.

Add to the list of impressive, recent discoveries *Livistona halongensis*, which somehow managed to hide in plain sight, a remarkable feat for a 30 foot-tall robust palm, until 1994 when Anders Lindstrom of Nong Nooch Tropical Botanical Garden noted several specimens as he bounced along in the back of a pickup on Cat Ba Island, one of some 1600 limestone islands in Vietnam's stunningly beautiful Ha Long Bay. Anders was traveling with Nguyen Tien Hiep of

Vietnam's Institute of Ecology and Biological Resources and Si-lin Yang, sponsored by The Montgomery Foundation and Fairchild Tropical Garden. The group was conducting some of the first modern botanical research in a country where such activities had been hindered greatly by a nearly a half century of continuous armed conflict. Dr. Yang later published a diary of the expedition referring to, "unidentified species of *Caryota*, *Licuala*, *Livistona* and *Phoenix*."

The process of formally identifying *Livistona halongensis* as a new species began when Ruth Kiew of the Singapore Botanic Garden sent Anders an email asking him to confirm that the palms on Cat Ba Island were indeed *Livistona*. Her skepticism was understandable given that Anders is better known for his expertise on cycads – perhaps you have heard of *Cycas lindstromii* – than for his experience with palms. I do not know the exact words Anders used in his reply, but I clearly remember what he told me. "I know a *Livistona* when I see one, and it's a freakin' *Livistona*!" Dr. Kiew was able to obtain material from the exact same trees seen by Anders and she, along with Dr. Hiep, would go on to describe the species as new to science. The type description is replete with detail about the adaxial hastula, brown ligules, and subglobose anthers, but alas, never employs the adjective 'freakin'.





Previous page - Tourist junks moored among the limestone islands of Ha Long Bay.

Left - The author's niece, Laura, catching a ride with a local across Cat Ba Island on the way to the national park.

Below - *L. halongensis* emerging above a low section of canopy in Cat Ba National Park in Ha Long Bay, Vietnam.

Still, Anders's decidedly non-scientific description of a freakin' *Livistona* was enough to stoke my interest, so in 2008, I dragged my college-aged niece, Laura, with me across Cat Ba Island in search of some palms in habitat. In truth, traveling to Ha Long Bay was her idea. As a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it is one of the more popular tourist destinations in Vietnam with dozens of operators offering tours of the bay and islands mostly via large, tourist junks. Not surprisingly, none of the tourist handlers focus on finding palms in habitat. For that, we needed to follow the same route as Anders from the ferry harbor at Cat Ba City across the interior of the island to the entrance of the national park. We chose the relative luxury of hiring motorbikes with drivers, even though there was little chance of getting lost on the handful of roads on the island.

Unlike Anders we saw no *Livistona halongensis* on the road to the park but spotted a several mature specimens – each between about 20 and 30 feet tall – after a 45-minute, slippery but fairly easy hike into the park. The most striking characteristic of the palms we saw were the extraordinarily long flower stalks that radiated from among the leaves and extended several feet beyond the crown. Many months since they had first flowered, the stalks had aged from a fresh green to a rusty pink or red-brown color, and each was branched many times over into lacy panicles that bobbed gently in whatever breezes managed to stir the heavy tropical air. The spectacularly showy inflorescences make this species a fine candidate for the garden and certainly qualify it as one freakin' *Livistona*.

Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank Anders Lindstrom for telling me the story of his first encounter with *Livistona halongensis* and pointing me in the right direction to find it on my own. 

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