

## Where is New Caledonia?

by Larry Noblick, Collections Manager

Located 1,200 km off the east coast of Australia and 1,500 km NNW of New Zealand is large island with a fascinating history. About 65-75 million years ago, a small mountainous sliver of land about 400 km long and 50 km wide separated from Australia and drifted into the subtropics, carrying with it a sampling of the ancient flora. Australia in the meantime suffered serious droughts that devastated and greatly modified its plant communities. But the amiable environment of the drifting island of New Caledonia preserved the original species, which continued to diversify.

For years, the richness of the New Caledonian flora, with its ancient tropical gymnosperms and awesome giant tree ferns, has attracted botanists. Its 37 endemic palm species are noteworthy and appear to have diversified from three types of palms. Unfortunately, most of the palms have retained a slower-than-slow growth rate. Many have beautifully colored, textured crownshafts hugging the stems just below their crowns. It is the uniqueness of these palms that motivated me to stay on New Caledonia for three weeks after an International Palm Society meeting to do some serious collecting for MBC.

Had I landed on New Caledonia 150 years ago, the Kanak tribesmen (black-skinned Melanesians) would have invited me to a meal in which I would have been their main course. The Kanaks were still eating each other and newcomers when the first French missionaries arrived and convinced them to stop. In 1849, the rich mineral deposits (especially nickel) motivated France to claim New Caledonia as one of its possessions. This French notion of ownership has never “sat well” with the Kanaks. Today, the island remains somewhat divided, with those who are descendents of the early white French and penal colonists populating the southern half of the island and those who are primarily of Kanak descent in the north. Politically, they are divided, which makes getting permits for plant collecting a double challenge.

My most memorable palm collecting day

was October 19, when I and palm enthusiasts Freddy Nothis, Roger Lemesle, and Jean Paul Tivoliea travelled with Eddy Vico, a New Caledonian of mixed French/Kanak descendant. Eddy is French in his thinking and lifestyle, with a Kanak complexion.

Eddy guided us to the Forêt Pwaala (Pwaala Forest) where we saw *Veillonia alba*, *Burretio kentia hapala*, and *Alloschmidia glabrata*. We drove over very bad jeep trails to get there. It had rained the night before, so the road was still soft and slippery. At one point we left Freddy's 4x4 Chevrolet and we



**Above:** Freddy looking up into a *Veillonia alba* in the Forêt Pwaala. **Right:** Trying to get the Land Rover up a muddy slope.

all piled into Eddy's Land Rover. The road immediately worsened as we crossed a small stream and headed up a steep, deep muddy slope. We all had to get out and use the wench and cable to pull the vehicle up the hill. In the end, the Forêt Pwaala was well worth the effort. Not much was in fruit except for *Veillonia alba*, but we managed to find and collect seedlings of the other species. The valley was filled with individuals of “kaori”, a giant tropical, broad-leaved gymnosperm

species (*Agathis* sp.). The valley frequently floods and the violent currents viciously pound the trunks of these kaori with big rocks. The injured trunks ooze large amounts of resin, which seals the injuries and provides a source of resin used in many homemade cures. The New Caledonians collected a “brick” or two of the resin to take home.

We returned to the 4x4 Chevrolet and headed to the top of Mt. Mandjélia (800 m altitude), close to the town of Pouébo. Unlike most of the New Caledonian peaks, there is a road (albeit a bad one) to the top where there is a communication tower. The day was clear and the view was magnificent. The light and deep bluish-colored hues of the lagoon and ocean beyond contrasted with the dark green mountainous “backbone” of the Panié Massif. Eddy was able to locate fruit of an unusual form of *Basselina gracilis* (called “Pencil Form”), with its very thin stems and irregular leaf shape. He also boosted me up a palm stem to collect *Burretio kentia vieillardii* fruits. It turned out to be the best seed and seedling collecting day of the entire trip.

On the return to Ouégué, we ran into an armed police roadblock. Luckily, they were looking for unlicensed hunters of animals, not plants. I had all the proper permits, but encounters with police are always a bit nerve-racking. We finally arrived at the hotel tired and hungry, and what better way to finish off the day than to dine on a plate full of fruit bats cooked in a fine wine sauce. An exotic dish for an exotic island adventure!

