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## “Paradiso Principum”— A Palm Paradise in Cuba

CELIO E. MOYA LOPEZ

% Grupo de Recursos Naturales, Ministerio de Ciencia, Tecnología y Medio Ambiente, Apdo. 52, CP 60200, Sancti Spiritus, Cuba

PETER T. MAYOTTE

540 Knowles Avenue, Winter Park, Florida 32789 USA

Sancti Spiritus province is located in the center of Cuba. It is gifted with beautiful countryside and a rich flora, in which palms are well represented. Of the 14 indigenous Cuban genera, nine are found in Sancti Spiritus, with a total of 23 species. The genus *Copernicia* is especially prominent with nine species, three of which are thought to be natural hybrids (Table 1).

In the southeastern part of the province, between the rivers Zaza and Jatibonico del Sur, lies a particularly rich palm habitat. Seven species have been identified growing here by the principal author (Table 2). This area is a flat coastal plain, with

tidal areas and mangrove colonies along the southern coast. Much of the area has been given over to sugarcane cultivation and ranching. However, large local stands of *Copernicia* palms remain, often in spectacular local abundance.

One notable, and mosquito-infested, habitat occurs south of the village of Los Galleguitos in an area known as La Sierpe. Here, very near the sea, are dense stands of *Copernicia rigida*. Fire seems to occur periodically here as evidenced by scorched trunks of older plants (Fig. 1). In this population there is marked variation among individuals in leaf width (Fig. 2), as well as leaf color. Leaf color seems to be somewhat dependent on wax coating. Plants with denser coatings have a more blue-gray leaf color.

Although the leaf of *C. rigida* is described as lacking a petiole, one may rarely see seedlings and juveniles with petioles. Many individuals have conspicuously long hastulas. These often persist on older plants after the dried leaves fall (Fig. 3).

Mixed with *C. rigida* in this locality are many individuals of *C. macroglossa*, easily distinguished by the wider, semi-orbicular leaves and stouter, less-branched inflorescences. *C. baileyana* and *C.*

Table 1. Palms indigenous to Sancti Spiritus Province, Cuba.

<i>Acoelorrhaphe wrightii</i> (Griseb. & H. Wendl.) H. Wendl. ex Becc.
<i>Calyptronoma plumeriana</i> (Martius) Lourteig
<i>Coccothrinax clarensis</i> Leon
<i>C. littoralis</i> Leon
<i>C. miraguama</i> (Kunth.) Leon
<i>C. trinitensis</i> Borhidi & Muniz
<i>C. sp.</i> “blue leaves”
<i>Copernicia baileyana</i> Leon
<i>C. gigas</i> Ekman in Burret
<i>C. hospita</i> Mart.
<i>C. macroglossa</i> H. Wendl. ex Becc.
<i>C. molineti</i> Leon
<i>C. rigida</i> Britton & Wilson
<i>C. × burretianum</i> Leon
<i>C. × textilis</i> Leon
<i>C. × vespertilionum</i> Leon
<i>Gaussia spirituana</i> Moya & Leiva
<i>Gastrococos crispa</i> (Kunth.) H. E. Moore
<i>Roystonea regia</i> (Kunth.) Cook
<i>Sabal maritima</i> (Kunth.) Burret
<i>Sabal palmetto</i> (Walt.) Lodd. ex Schultes
<i>Thrinax morrisii</i> H. Wendl
<i>T. radiata</i> Lodd. ex Schultes

Table 2. *Copernicia* species found in Rio Zaza/Rio Jatibonico del Sur area (“Palmar Romero”).

<i>Copernicia baileyana</i> Leon
<i>C. gigas</i> Ekman in Burret
<i>C. hospita</i> Mart.
<i>C. macroglossa</i> H. Wendl. ex Becc.
<i>C. molineti</i> Leon?
<i>C. rigida</i> Britton & Wilson
<i>C. × textilis</i> Leon
<i>C. × vespertilionum</i> Leon



1. A stand of *Copernicia rigida* near Los Galleguitos with fire damage. 2. Striking younger plant of *Copernicia rigida* with narrow leaves.





3. Persistent hastulas in old plant of *Copernicia rigida*. 4. *Copernicia x vespertilionum* (center) in habitat with *C. rigida* (L) and *C. x textilis* (R). 5. Older *Copernicia gigas* near Siete de Noviembre, Cuba. 6. *Copernicia x textilis* with fusiform trunks. Older individuals in background.

× *vespertilionum* rear up here and there as scattered individuals. *C. × vespertilionum* (Fig. 4) has been described as a natural hybrid of *Copernicia gigas* and *C. rigida* by Leon (1931). It is differentiated from *C. rigida* in having a petiole, a shorter hastula (up to 10 cm), and more segments (32–40). It differs from *C. gigas* in having persistent dried leaves, a shorter petiole, and fewer segments. *C. × vespertilionum* is found only in Central Cuba, and is classified as rare by the IUCN (1989). It is known to local people as the “*jata de los murcielagos*” or “bat palm” because bats seem to prefer roosting in its crown.

Although *Copernicia gigas* does not occur in this locality, large populations exist nearby, close to the pueblo Siete de Noviembre. Cultivated land intervenes. These populations appear to be almost pure stands of the palm. Many plants have an attractive yellow-stripe margin to their petioles. Older plants grow quite tall (at least 12 m) forming impressive specimens (Fig. 5).

*Copernicia hospita* is seen as widely scattered individuals and small groups in the entire region, often kept on cultivated land. Dahlgren and Glassman (1963) described it as one of the parents (with *C. baileyana*) of the natural hybrid *Copernicia × textilis*. This palm also is found in the Los Galleguitos area (Fig. 6) and is restricted to central Cuba. It differs from *C. baileyana* by having fewer leaf segments (68–84) of shorter length and by its more delicate inflorescences. It is distinguished from *C. hospita* in having a larger

number of segments and a more robust petiole. *Copernicia × textilis* often displays a fusiform or ventricose trunk. This palm occurs in small-to-moderately sized stands and does not appear threatened.

*Copernicia molinetti* is a species that has not been collected since 1931. If still present it should grow in an estuarine area directly on the southern coast in the region under consideration. This area is difficult to reach due to poor or absent roads and estuarine channels. The status of this population is unknown.

Recently a proposal has been made to create a natural reserve in southern Sancti Spiritus to include the areas described. This reserve would be called the Palmar Romero, and would represent a vibrant living legacy of the evolution of the genus *Copernicia* in central Cuba.

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