

Comparing the 2006 and 2008

IPS Biennials

Article and Photos by Jack Sayers, Los Angeles, CA

I still remember the 2006 PSSC banquet at the Catamaran Hotel in San Diego. It was the first PSSC banquet I'd ever attended and IPS president Paul Craft was in from Florida to give a preview of the upcoming IPS biennial. I wasn't really sure what to expect, but the pictures he presented blew me away: 100 foot tall *Coccothrinax boschiana* growing on a cliff overlooking the turquoise Caribbean, *Pseudophoenix ekmanii* with bulging white trunks growing with cacti on dogtooth limestone, and on and on.

After seeing the pictures, I knew I had to find a way to make it to the Dominican Republic that October. As the months went by I kept coming up with excuses not to go: I don't have the money, I don't know anyone who's going, etc. But, a week or so before the deadline, my wife Lindsey finally convinced me that I needed a vacation and I should do it. It was one of the best decisions I've ever made, I saw some

incredible palms and met a lot of great people from all over the world. When I got back, I told Lindsey that we were both going to the next biennial, and we signed up as soon as the information for Costa Rica was posted on the IPS website. Now we're patiently waiting for the Brazil biennial in 2010.

The 2006 biennial started at the botanical garden in Santo Domingo, where we had the morning to look around at all the palms. The garden was incredible, with lots of mature *Coccothrinax*, *Pseudophoenix*, and other palms from the Caribbean and around the world. We then left for the Guavaberry golf course east of the city. When building this course, the owners had saved hundreds (thousands?) of *Acrocomia aculeata* that had been growing in the area in order to plant them around the course and clubhouse. After that we went back to the hotel in Santo Domingo, where we were on our own for dinner that night. Even though I didn't





Previous page - *Coccothrinax boschiana* growing on a steep cliff overlooking the Caribbean from the south coast of the Dominican Republic. The leaves alternate between green and silver in the gentle breeze.

Left - A *Pseudophoenix ekmanii* loaded with immature fruit. Seeing these palms in habitat was the highlight of the 2006 IPS Biennial.

Below - This *P. ekmanii* provided a nice snack for our local guides, along with some of the attendees who gave it a try.



know anyone when the day started, I joined up with a friendly group of attendees and we went to a restaurant built in a cave underground. I've never had gourmet food while watching water drip from stalactites next to my table. It was a good day, but when were we going to see some palms in habitat?

I didn't have to wait long. The next morning we packed our bags and boarded the buses to head west to Barahona near the Haitian border. About half way to Barahona we parked the buses and got on what looked like safari vehicles to go over a terrible road to the beach. When we got out we had to scramble around on the cliffs for about 30 minutes to get to the *Coccothrinax boschiana*. It felt like a steam room, and one of my new friends from the UK passed out during the hike. Luckily we had a nurse in the group who helped him out. When we turned the final corner and got a view of the palms, the view was indescribable. Trunks as thin as your arm stretched out over the ocean, with green and silver leaves moving back and forth in the wind. The sight was even better once we hiked into the grove. After the hike, we had boxed lunches near the ocean. Small sandwiches with meat and mayonnaise that had been sitting in the sun for hours. Yum. Unfortunately, lunch was like this pretty much every day... After lunch we finished the trip to Barahona, and checked into a hotel with style. A couple

of people were horrified, and took a taxi back to Santo Domingo, but I liked the place. It had a pool and a bar, what else do you need?

The next day turned out to be even better, and was the best palm-related day of my life so far. We boarded the buses early that morning and headed further west, passing a small stand of *Sabal dominguensis* in a cleared field near the beach. After a couple hours we made it to Jaragua National Park, where we loaded onto some helicopters (yeah, helicopters!) to fly into the heart of the park. The view from the helicopter was dry forests filled with *Pseudophoenix ekmanii* as far as the eye could see. When we landed we had about 60 minutes to explore the area on foot, which was a little difficult with all the thorny brush and dogtooth limestone under

foot. Almost immediately we saw a *P. ekmanii* with a square hole cut in the trunk just under the crownshaft. One of our local guides was there eating the inside of the palm, probably not even realizing that it was at least 100 years old! Luckily there were hundreds of other *P. ekmanii* in perfect condition, and this palm is definitely a superstar. The trunks are ringed and covered in thick white wax, and the stiff leaves have the texture of plastic. Even if a hurricane passed through they probably wouldn't bend. Another palm was also well represented in the area, *Coccothrinax ekmanii*. Although not quite as impressive as the *C. boschiana* from the day before, these were still some incredible palms with silver undersides to the leaves and neatly thatched trunks.

We woke up early the following morning and headed west and north, up into the mountains. Along the way we pulled off the highway to see another population of *Coccothrinax ekmanii* before reaching our final destination, Sierra de Bahoruca National Park at an elevation of 4000 feet. The area was filled with pine trees, and it looked like a place you might find in California. It was also nice and cool, which felt great after spending the last few days in the steam room down by the coast. After hiking around in the forest for a while we finally found what we were looking for, *Coccothrinax scoparia*. This is another great palm, with a little thicker trunk and leaves that are a little more elegant than the other *Coccothrinax* we had seen so far. After seeing the habitat, this seems like a palm that should grow well in California.

That night turned out to be a little more than I had bargained for. After having dinner back at the hotel, we were treated to a performance by local musicians and dancers. These guys were incredible, and the show probably lasted for more than an hour, with no breaks for the performers. After that I was inspired, and I went with some of the other attendees to the bar across the street. About 15 minutes after we walked in, a bunch of local girls showed up to "entertain" us. We tried to politely say no, but they were tenacious. These girls were not shy, and as soon as one of them stuck her tongue in my mouth I decided it was time to go. And I thought the trip would be all about palms?

After getting over my embarrassment, I was ready for another day of palm viewing. We finally left Barahona and started the journey back to Santo Domingo. Along the way we pulled off the main road and hopped back into the safari vehicles for



Above - *Coccothrinax spissa* growing on an exposed slope in the Dominican Republic. Although not the prettiest *Coccothrinax*, these palms are definitely unique.

Left - *Coccothrinax scoparia*, growing in a cool pine forest at an elevation of 4000 feet. Based on the climate where this palm grows, it may be a good one for California if shade can be provided.

Right - Crowns of several mature *Copernicia berteroana*.

Below - The colorful, and waxy, crownshaft and upper trunk of a large *Pseudophoenix vinifera*.

Bottom - *Coccothrinax ekmanii* growing near the side of the road in the extreme west of the Dominican Republic. Although not as silver as the *C. boschiana*, these palms were an impressive sight.



another 30-minute trip. When we got out, we were treated to a view of *Pseudophoenix vinifera* in habitat. Unlike the *P. ekmanii*, these guys were growing in pretty good soil, and they were HUGE, probably 40-50 feet tall. At this point there were some logistical problems, and we had to wait for about an hour after the hike for the safari vehicles. Another guy passed out from the heat (and he was even from the Caribbean), but luckily he was okay after cooling off and drinking some water. We returned to the buses and went a little further down the road before stopping again. The safari vehicles took us to a cleared field with hundreds of mature *Copernicia berteroana*. These palms are gorgeous, with bright green leaves, waxy petioles, and perfect spherical crowns. There was plenty of evidence of fire in the area, so clearly these were tough palms. If that wasn't enough, the bus had one more stop for us that day, this time to see a cleared hillside covered with *Coccothrinax spissa*. These are some funky palms with thick trunks that have even bigger bulges about half-way up. Definitely not the prettiest *Coccothrinax*, but interesting.

It was a little sad getting back to Santo Domingo that night, knowing we only had one day left and we weren't going to see any more palms in habitat. Since the last day was free, I made plans with some of my new friends. We decided to go back to the botanical garden in the morning, then see the city in the afternoon. As expected, we found a lot of gems in the garden that we had missed the first time, and walking around the city was a good experience. I even tried some mamajuana, a local drink with herbs, spices, leaves, twigs, rum, wine, honey, and who knows what else that's supposed to increase your sexual stamina. No comment on whether it worked or not... Back at the hotel we had the going away dinner, and again there were some amazing local performers. This time I got pulled out of the audience to dance with one of the gorgeous performers, which was



another experience I'll never forget.

After hearing about how much fun I had in the Dominican Republic, Lindsey couldn't wait to join me in Costa Rica (or maybe she just wanted to make sure I didn't go to any more local bars...). We left a few days early to go on one of the pre-tours to Tortuguero National Park on the Caribbean coast. After a short night in San Jose, we got on a bus the next morning expecting to see a bunch of IPS members, but we were surprised to find out only one other attendee was joining us for the pre-tour. After a long bus ride, we took a 90 minute boat ride to get to the park. The river was amazing, lined with huge stands of *Raphia taedigera* and *Manicaria saccifera*. We even passed one population of *M. saccifera* that had bright red emerging leaves, but I wasn't fast enough with the camera. There were also some tall *Euterpe* sp. poking above the canopy in the background. We were excited when we arrived at the lodge we were going to stay at for the next two nights; it had individual open-air huts and a beautiful pool. After dropping our things off in the room we took a quick tour of the local town, which had a lot of nice arts and crafts.

The next morning we went cruising in a boat around the waterways inside the park. This is the only way to see most of it, since it's a swamp. The highlight was definitely the monkeys, turtles, lizards, sloths, and other wildlife we saw. The experience of seeing lots of monkeys moving around in tree tops 100 feet off the ground is indescribable. Also, there were a few palms in the park. We saw a couple species of *Geonoma*, along with species of *Calyptrogone*, *Bactris gasipes*, and *Cryosophila*. We had one more boat ride the next morning before it was time to head to San Jose and start the biennial.

Back in San Jose, we checked into the most spectacular hotel I ever stayed at, where we would be for the rest of the biennial. It was fun to go to the welcome dinner that night and meet up with a lot of the people I met in the Dominican Republic and hadn't seen in two years. It was also nice to meet a bunch of new palm addicts who were attending their first biennial.

The next morning, we left for the nurseries and gardens of Marco and Gerardo Herrero. The gardens were incredible, with thousands of mature palms from all over the world. It was funny to see 50-foot tall *Veitchias* still in 5-gallon grow bags. I guess that's what happens when you forget to pot something up in the tropics... After we left the gardens we traveled to InBioparque, a nice museum/park showcasing the flora and fauna from the various climate zones within Costa Rica. It was a great start, just like the 2006 biennial, but I was still waiting for some palms in habitat!

I didn't have to wait long, as we left the next morning for Braulio Carillo National Park on the wet Caribbean side of



Above - A *Cryosophila* sp. growing on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica in Tortuguero National Park.

Below - *Manicaria saccifera*, also growing in Tortuguero National Park. This palm was extremely widespread in the area, and there was even a small population with red emergent leaves.





Left - *Hyospathe elegans* growing over the trail in Braulio Carillo National Park.

Below - *Welfia Regia* in Braulio Carillo NP.

Bottom left - *Calyptrogyne ghiesbreghtiana*, catching a rare glimpse of the sun in Braulio Carillo NP.

Bottom right - A *Geonoma*, possibly *G. cuneata*, showing a spectacular red leaf near Braulio Carillo NP.



the country. We started with a tour on an aerial tram, which was an open air cable car that went through the jungle at a range of heights, from near the floor to above the canopy. What an experience! Initially, we were looking down on some small *Asterogyne martiana* and *Calyptrogyne ghiesbreghtiana*, but soon we were face to face with the 30-foot long bright red emerging leaves of some *Welfia regia*. Before long we were at eye level with *Socratea exorrhiza*, *Iriartea deltoidea*, and *Euterpe precatoria*. This was definitely the best experience of the biennial. In the afternoon we went to a different location inside the park to hike. Almost immediately, someone spotted an anteater in a nearby tree about 75 feet above the ground. It was huge, and probably the neatest animal I saw in Costa Rica. Back to the palms, we saw all of the species that were near the tram, plus *Geonoma congesta*,

Cryosophila warscewiczii, *Pholidostachys pulchra*, *Bactris coloradonis*, and *Hyospathe elegans*. I'm sure there were a lot of others I missed. Easily the most impressive were the *Cryosophila*, with bright white undersides to the perfectly shaped leaves. I'm inspired to plant a grove of these at my place, but I'm sure they'd never look as good.

The next day, we headed to the drier west coast to hike in Carara National Park.

Although this was still a jungle, the vegetation was a little more open compared to Braulio Carillo, which I prefer. The most widespread palm we saw was *Chamaedorea tepejilote*, which was growing similar to how you see it in California, except that it had numerous aerial roots connected to the ground. We also saw a couple of large *Attalea butyracea*, which were an impressive sight. The park also had several *Astrocaryum alatum* and some spectacular *Cryosophila guagara*. Have I mentioned how good *Cryosophilas* look in habitat? We also saw a group of monkeys swinging from tree to tree above us at one point, and I think everyone forgot about palms for about 20 minutes and just watched in awe at the grace and athleticism of these



animals.

Our destination the following day was the hanging bridges at Arenal, on the wet Caribbean side. The hike contained several suspension bridges, some of which were 150 feet off the ground. Just like the aerial tram, this gave us a good chance to see the jungle from various heights. Unfortunately, this was a difficult day for several attendees, including Lindsey. The bridges swayed quite a bit when you walked across them, and had open gratings, which made them overwhelming for people with a fear of heights. Lindsey made it across, but others had to turn back. Along the hike we saw many of the same palms that were in Braulio Carillo but there were also several new species. We saw quite a few *Prestoea decurrens*, *Bactris hondurensis*, *Chamaedorea tepejilote*, and several species of *Geonoma*. However, the palms that really took my breath away were the *Chamaedorea deckeriana* and *C. pinnatifrons*. Spectacular!

Things got a little crazy on our bus on the way back from Arenal. First, we had our driver stop near a hotel with some huge *Cyrtostachys renda* out front. We met the owner, and he told us to take as much seed as we wanted. He gave us a pole, but when that didn't work one of the more limber attendees climbed up the trunks and threw the seeds down to us. We ended up with several garbage bags full. Then, a little while after we got back on the bus, our driver clipped a car going to opposite direction on the narrow road and broke the rear view mirror on the driver's side. A few minutes later one of the tires blew out, so we had to pull over and change it. Fortunately, we pulled over at a bar, so the time passed relatively quickly, and we were in a good mood when we got back on the bus. Someone had some speakers, so we started playing jams from ipods, people started dancing in the aisle, and the driver flashed the inside lights to make it look like a disco. I think we were all a little disappointed when we got back to the hotel and had to get off the bus.

That was pretty much the end of the palms. The next day we went to the Poas volcano in the morning, which unfortunately had filled with fog minutes before we reached the edge of the crater. We were able to see thousands of colorful bromeliads walking around near the volcano, but there were no palms. Then we visited a series of waterfalls in La Paz. It was incredible to go on the walkways right up next to the 50-100 foot falls, and we even saw some *Chamaedorea tepejilote* growing on the steep sides of the falls. On the way back, our bus decided to have a talent show. Surprisingly, a lot of the attendees did have talents for singing, mixing drinks, and various other things. Somehow, my talent ended up being a pose-off with one of the attendees who was a personal trainer. He walked around the bus shirtless, showing off his huge biceps, and I followed with my twig arms and bright white chest. Still, I somehow managed to get just as much money stuffed down my pants... Maybe because I didn't have any underwear on? At least I had my embarrassing moment for this biennial out of the way.

Just like the Dominican biennial, the last day was free. We joined a lot of other attendees going to a farm that had



Above - The spectacular white undersides of the leaves of a *Cryosophila guagara* growing on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica in Carara National Park.

Below - A new leaf just opening on a *Chamaedorea deckeriana* near the Arenal Volcano.

Bottom left - A spectacular red leaf on a *Geonoma* sp. near the Arenal Volcano.





white-water rafting, horseback riding, and canopy ziplines. We started with horseback riding, which scares me to death, especially on steep, rocky, muddy hills. I don't think I've ever been that scared in my whole life; I couldn't stop hyperventilating. Fortunately nobody made fun of me... too much. After that we went ziplining. Almost everyone else seemed to be terrified about flying through the canopy, but it seemed pretty bland to me after the horse ride. We headed back to the hotel for the farewell banquet. It was sad to see the end of another biennial, but at least they had dancing!

Looking back, both of these biennials were amazing experiences. The lodging and food was definitely much better in Costa Rica, but it didn't quite have the charm of the Dominican Republic. We also saw a lot more



palms in Costa Rica, but they weren't nearly as spectacular as the ones we saw in the Dominican. Of course, the people were great at both events, but it was nice to have Lindsey with me for the 2008 biennial. The two biennials were so different that it's tough to say which one I liked better, but if I had to choose one place to go back to it would definitely be the Dominican Republic. Needless to say, I can't wait for Brazil in 2010!



Top left - A massive Iriartea deltoidea just above one of the hanging bridges near Arenal Volcano.

Above - One of the more athletic attendees collecting seeds from a Cyrtostachys renda we saw growing near the road.

Left - A view from above on two Prestoea decurrens from one of the hanging bridges near Arenal.