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HELICONIA SOCIETY OF PUERTO RICO, INC.

The HSPR Newsletter

Solomon Islands

By Bruce Dunstan, HSPR Member

I have been lucky enough to travel to the Solomon Islands three times over the past 15 years. I think I was motivated primarily by an article written by John Kress that first appeared in a Heliconia Society International Bulletin in 1988 as well as in *Heliconia: An Identification Guide* in 1991. In this article John described his trip to the Solomon Islands to see *Heliconia lanata*. Here were plants that I was very interested in, growing only 4 hours away by plane, rather than the 22 hours plus to get to the neotropics where the bulk of the genus occurs. The fact that the plants were pollinated not by hummingbirds but by bats at night also added to the intrigue and heightened my desire to go and have a look at them.

Dugout canoes and thatched homes in the Solomon Islands.

The Solomon Islands are approximately 8 degrees south from the equator, and consist of many islands, big and small, spread throughout the Coral Sea. Waters are incredibly deep, where you can swim 100m off an island and be swimming in water 2km deep. This allows deep-water species to come very close. We were snorkelling one day and had a blue marlin leap out of the water only 15m away from us. Stories of killer whales coming out of the deep water to inspect scuba divers are also heard around dive resorts in the Solomon Islands. Heliconias have been found generally growing from sea level to about 500m. I have spent most of my time on these three trips looking for heliconias and related plants on the island of New Georgia in the Western Province, a one-hour plane ride from Honiara.

The easiest way to get to the plants has been to take a boat and travel up rivers, as roads were not common in earlier years. Disturbed areas are perfect spots for heliconias to colonise and these light gaps are also areas where gingers and Marantaceae are found. The local people are subsistence farmers and cultivate their crops by a slash and burn system whereby plots are

***Heliconia indica* from New Georgia, held by David, the son of a Kolo chief.**

Inside this issue:

Solomon Islands	1
President's Corner	4

Dates to Remember

- *HSPR Meeting, 10:00 am, Sunday, September 9, 2007. Farm of Edgardo Varela, Caguas, PR.*

***Heliconia indica* 'New Georgia'.**

abandoned after a few years in cultivation. The first heliconia I came across was *Heliconia indica*. This plant is actually cultivated by the local people and is used as a food wrap in cooking, with fish wrapped in the leaves then cooked on open fires. We saw patches or even rows of this species being grown. The variety grown in our collecting area in and around the Kolo River had red lower midribs as well as red margins to the leaves. The bracts were green and had red on the inner surfaces as well as the bract tips. This plant grows to a height of between 3-4m tall.

On other islands *Heliconia indica* has small differences to its colouration. On Rendova Island, a short boat ride away from South Western New Georgia, the *Heliconia indica* plants we saw had a pinkish rachis with none of the red coloration of the variety we saw on New Georgia. On Guadalcanal, in the hills behind Honiara, the capital of Solomon Islands, we had the pleasure of being shown *Heliconia indica* 'Dennisiana' by Geoff Dennis, for who it was named, on our first trip in 1992. This form of *Heliconia indica* has no red on its leaves or bracts but has a yellowish rachis. The other species growing in the forest along the Kolo River is *Heliconia lanata*. This plant has a pendent inflorescence that is covered in fuzzy hairs. Like pretty much all the Solomon Island heliconias it is predominantly green with yellow on the rachis and inside the bracts. *Heliconia lanata* grows 3-5m tall.

Other plants we saw in this region included a tall *Alpinia* that had a red branched inflorescence. This *Alpinia* grows to 5-6m tall and produces lots of black seed pods full of fertile seed. I believe it is still to be named but the seed we collected on our first trip has been spread through botanical gardens and has also found its way into the commercial floriculture, known as 'Pink Coral'. *Alpinia purpurata* also grows throughout the region. In the Kolo River it has pink bracts in a congested head almost spherical in shape. It also was quite a large growing form getting up to 5m tall. We were able to find *Tapeinochilos solomonensis* growing along the river. This plant grows to 2m tall producing red brown inflorescences 150mm tall. This species also showed a little variation in colour of its inflorescence depending on where we saw it growing, with some populations a much redder shade than others.

Marantaceae were represented by the genus *Cominsia*. The first species we found had green leaves and a branched inflorescence with large white flowers. The second plant had purple backed leaves with smaller inflorescences and quite happily colonised the disturbed roadsides of logging roads. The other notable Zingiberales member we saw growing was *Curcuma* (turmeric) that would have been cultivated for it's culinary and ethno botanic uses. I doubt it is naturally occurring in Solomon Islands but it has naturalised itself quite happily.

Logging has certainly changed the Solomon Islands. Overseas timber companies come and take whole logs out of the country by sea. This doesn't allow locals to value add to their natural resource. Over the past 15 years we have seen

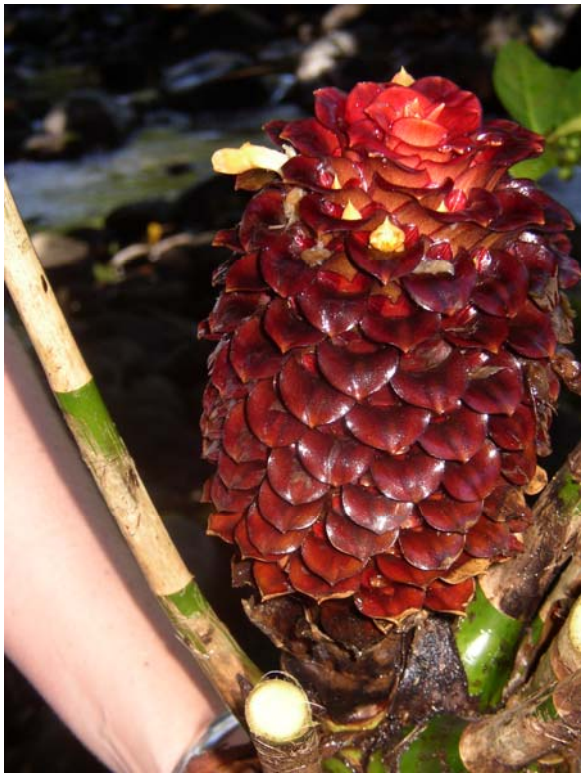
***Heliconia indica* with pinkish rachis from Rendova Island.**

***Heliconia indica* 'Dennisiana' with yellowish rachis from Guadalcanal.**

the Kolo River go from a pristine state to a logged one and now it is slowly recovering. The heliconias and related plants have been given more disturbed areas in which to colonise and their populations have increased from what they were originally in the unlogged forest. Their long-term survival may be jeopardised by changing weather patterns or other environmental changes brought on by the removal of the native forest. I look forward to returning to Solomon Islands and enjoying its laidback way of life and beautiful natural features.

Pendent *Heliconia lanata* from the Kolo River area.

The beautiful *Alpinia* 'Pink Coral' from Kolo River.



Tapeinochilos solomonensis.

HELICONIA SOCIETY OF PUERTO RICO, INC.

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HSPR

Promoting Zingiberales in Puerto Rico since 1996.

The Heliconia Society of Puerto Rico, Inc. was founded in 1996. The objectives of the society are to stimulate and promote the enjoyment and understanding of Heliconia *and related plants of the order Zingiberales through education, research and communication, and to interact with the Heliconia Society International and other institutions which share similar interests, purposes or objectives.*

President's Corner

Last month's "Meet the Experts" lecture was very successful. Bruce's slides were most impressive. Even though we did not have a good turnout from the general public, we have little control of when the press will, or will not, run the press releases submitted to them. Our guest speaker, Bruce Dunstan, and his traveling companion, Steve, want me to thank all of the members for their hospitality. They enjoyed their stay here very much and were very impressed with the heliconia collections that they visited. They took back many seeds to Australia that have since sprouted and seem to be doing well.

Our next meeting will be the second Sunday of September (September 9) at the farm of Edgardo Varela in Caguas. Directions on how to get to his property will be included in another section of this bulletin. This meeting will be a "Pot Luck" lunch. Therefore, everyone should bring something delicious to eat or drink so that we have plenty for everyone.

Our lecturer for this meeting will be Arnaldo Astacio, who has volunteered to give us a very in depth discussion of the various types of orchids and the requirements for their general care, watering, planting media, fertilizers, insect, bacterial, viral and fungal diseases, and treatments. I have asked Arnaldo to give us this talk since almost all of us that have Zingiberales plants also have a few orchid plants and I thought that his information would be of interest and benefit to all of us.

I hope that all of you will attend because I know that it will be a very enjoyable and informative meeting.

Best regards,
Ray Jerome
President, HSPR

Don't miss December's HSPR Newsletter!!!

HSPR member Bob Castro will share the exciting news about a beautiful new heliconia cultivar named 'Siberia Lemon' (shown below, photo by Sherry Ballester).