



The Coconut Palm – *Cocos nucifera*

Apart from the traveller's initial impression in the developed areas of Diego Garcia, the coconut palm dominates all the islands which have been inhabited. The islands, first viewed from the sea, present an even skyline of waving coconut fronds and an abrupt vertical transition from sea surface to palm top. Landing on the islands, you walk from the beach through a narrow band of *Scaevola* or *Argusia (Tournefortia)* scrub and under the cool but chaotic coconut canopy. High above, the stellate leaf rosette fans stand out against the sky, held by ruler-straight trunks with no branching. The ground beneath is littered with a deep mulch of palm material, overlain by more recently fallen giant fronds, old trunks, flower stalks, and an ankle-twisting layer of fallen coconuts with almost no other plant cover.

We do not know if man was instrumental in first bringing coconuts to these and other oceanic islands, or whether fertile nuts were carried there by sea currents. What is known is that after about 1800 many islands were drastically cleared of all native vegetation to be replaced by orderly rows of coconut palms, grown for their oil. It is these plantations that, since settlement came to an end between 35 and 70 years ago, have now run rampant with a tangled ground layer of shed detritus, a dense growth of competing juvenile trees, and a soaring canopy of older trunks. Few other plant species can compete in the shade beneath and against all the palm detritus at ground level. New palms generate wherever space presents itself along the beach or from a fallen elderly palm torn down by the winds.

Such dense mono-specific vegetation benefits few other species. Noddies and Fairy Terns will nest on the fronds, black rats (another human introduction) abound, boring their way into the heavy nuts amazingly rapidly, and the giant Coconut Crabs lumber below and up the trunks, tearing nuts apart with their powerful claws.

Clearly, in order to encourage the growth of the original indigenous vegetation with its giant long-lived trees and open clearings suitable for important bird nesting, the problem of dominance by the tree-weed coconut palm will need to be addressed.

The Chagos Conservation Trust is a charity (Registered in the UK No. 1031561), whose aims are to promote conservation, scientific and historical research, and to advance education concerning the archipelago. The Trust is a non political association.

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