

AVICENNIA RESINIFERA [Solander] Forst.f. - what's in a name?

E.D. Hatch

Our mangrove is an endemic species occurring in tidal estuaries north of latitude 38° S, that is from a line drawn roughly between Kawhia and Opotiki. I mention this because the Forsters were never ashore in the North Island, and neither saw the trees growing nor collected specimens. George Forster seems to have taken the idea of the gum-producing mangroves from Solander, and the idea of the gum-chewing natives from Crozet, married them together and made the mangrove an edible plant. He may have also got supposed confirmation for his theory from Cook, with whom he shared the great cabin of the Resolution for the better part of 3 years. Ironically it was the same gum!

In 1963 (Tuatara 11: June 1963, p.68) I quoted Cook's Endeavour journal (Beaglehole 1: 1955, p.204)

'...in speaking of Mercury Bay I forgot to mention that the mangrove trees found there produce a resinous substance ... we found it at first in small lumps upon the sea beach, but afterwards found it sticking to the mangrove trees and by that means found out from whence it came ...

The resin was the familiar kauri gum and it was not produced by the mangrove. The name resinifera, though misleading, was perpetuated by George Forster, and having priority has stuck - like the gum it commemorates.

Beaglehole in a footnote (3) on p.204 says 'a bad conjecture' and by coincidence uses the very same word conjecturare, that Solander uses in his MS. description of the plant. (Primitiae Florae Novae Zelandiae typescript pp.124-5). Translating parts of Solander -

'this resin ... is not unlike the mastic

The mastiche was the chewing-gum-tree of the ancient Greeks (Pistacia lentiscus Linn.), and the resin is still used in Greece to flavour the retsina wine. Solander's use of this word may have influenced Forster's decision to treat the mangrove as an edible plant. Solander goes on

'we gathered pieces of it in abundance in the vicinity of these trees, and allowed ourselves on this account to guess that the resin exuded from the same ... other pieces of resin, often above the size of one's fist, were not infrequently carried rapidly out beyond the river-mouth, and we found them cast up again on the sea-shore ... but the trees themselves live in places subject to (tidal) flooding, especially about the banks of the rivers.

You will note the contrast between Cook's definite statement and Solander's reasoning diffidence.

The De Plantis Esculentis was George Forster's M.D. degree thesis, submitted to the University of Halle (Germany) 21 April 1785. (Hoare Resolution Journal of J.R. Forster 1: 1982, p.87) It was published in Berlin in 1786, and in it, p.72 n 44, George describes Avicennia resinifera using Solander's name. He then says -

our specimens were collected before the flowers opened, we then consulted Solander's A. resinifera in the Banksian herbarium and ascertained them to be the same species

What 'our specimens' were is a mystery, unless they were begged or borrowed at some time from Banks? They certainly weren't collected by the Forsters. Allan Flora of New Zealand 1961, p.961 says -

'Type' P? I found no Forster material at K

Nor could he expect to, George never collected any. The type of A. resinifera is surely the Banksian material in the British Museum. George continues -

'the gum which exudes vigorously from this tree is the same as that which is chewed by the barbarous people of New Zealand, as is made clear by the journal of the French navigator Crozet. (Voyage de M. Marion du Fresne p.67)

He then gives (in French which Mr Jim Beever has translated for me) the extract from Crozet -

'I have seen them eating a sort of green-coloured gum, which they appear to hold in great esteem, but I cannot discover from which tree they get it ...

You will again note the reasonable doubt of the original and the definite but erroneous conclusion. On the strength of this assumption George included the Auckland mangrove in his list of edible plants of the south Pacific!

EARLY BOTANICAL NOTES FROM NORTHLAND

Katie Reynolds

Here are two snippets from letters written by my grandfather Ralph Pickmere in 1860 from his land on the main road between Ahipara and Kaitaia. As an immigrant he had 40 acres for his land claim and an additional 10 acres for which he paid £5.

"In the sides and bottoms of the two gullies from which I get my water supply, a fine sandy loam full of decayed leaves, rotten sticks, &c., predominates. The land is covered with TUPAKA (tupakihi - Coriaria) bushes and large fern. The former is very like the Elder tree in general appearance and nature of the wood, having pith inside. The berries, however, which make excellent wine or vinegar, without the aid of sugar, hang on the stalks like ropes of onions."

Lucy Cranwell writing years ago for Auckland Star Native Wildflower Circle told the children "strain and drink the juice if you will. Be very careful not to swallow seeds, nor any other part of the plant which is very poisonous." I am quoting Lucy from memory. I think that she also said that the pre-European Maori would use the plumes of toetoe to strain the juice.

From Ralph Pickmere:

"There is a remarkable shrub here like the Coffee plant, has scarlet berries with two seeds in, exactly the shape of the Coffee berry. I have only seen one yet on my property."

The fern, Lunathyrium japonicum is quite rare in the Auckland region, so it was gratifying to see a large amount growing beside the Kaurimu Stream in the valley east of Shaw Road, Oratia. It was seen on private property, but as it was not far from the road bridge, further inspection may be rewarding.

Katie Mays