

A PUZZLE SOLVEDJ. Beaver

Why did George Forster in his book "A Voyage round the World in H.B.M.S. Resolution ...&c" published 1777, write, "They were properly speaking, a new species of dragon-trees, with broad leaves, (Dracaena australis) of which the central shoot when tender, tastes something like an almond's kernel, with a little of the flavour of a cabbage.", when he was really describing a species, Dracaena indivisa (now Cordyline indivisa) which they had discovered in Dusky Sound.

His statement has caused many readers to believe wrongly that cabbage-tree (Cordyline australis) shoots are good eating, and fuel the fable that Captain Cook used to feed his crew on cabbage tree. It is the more puzzling when we realise that George Forster himself was the first to formally publish this species, which he did as Dracaena indivisa in De Plantis Esculentis and the Prodromus in 1786. This puzzled me for some years.

Recently the light dawned; we are at fault not George. We assumed that his Dracaena australis in 1777 was the same as the D. australis he published in 1786, but this was not so. His father J.R. Forster in his Journal (written 1772-75) wrote of it as Dracaena antarctica, so obviously australis and antarctica were two of the possible species names for this plant discussed with Sparrman who first saw it. But until George finally published D. indivisa in 1786 there was NO scientific name for it. Yet nine years before that, in 1777 he unwisely wrote D. australis as above, whereas his father writing of the same incident in his Journal in 1772-75 had, more carefully, said simply, "... a kind of Dragon-tree (Dracaena Linn.)". None of the Resolution botanists saw Cordyline australis at Dusky Sound, they first saw it as, "... another species of Dracaena ", at Queen Charlotte Sound".

When George did finally publish officially in 1786 he had probably seen Banks and Solander's Primitae Florae Novae Zelandiae and noted that they had used Dracaena australis for the branching open-country tree all New Zealanders now call cabbage tree. So he decided to let Solander's name stand and gave the new name D. indivisa to the shorter, unbranched, broad-leaved mountain cabbage tree.

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