

# A Critically Endangered Palm Found Only on Bonaire

A recent report describes, for the first time in its history, the critically endangered Bonaire Palm. Although first documented in 1979, it took till 2019 before scientists identified this palm as native solely to Bonaire. With only 25 mature individuals remaining, conservation efforts must be taken immediately to ensure this species remains a part of the Bonairian landscape in the future.

## A New Palm Identified

A recently released publication clearly described, for the first time, a unique palm species found only on Bonaire. Sabal palms are a family of palm trees with 17 identified species (Zona, 1990, Goldman et al. 2012, Griffith et al. 2017). Although these palms have been identified in scientific literature within the Antillean islands before, it wasn't until 2017 that the first dedicated research was conducted on Bonaire (Griffith et al, 2017). Once these palms were more closely studied and compared, it soon became obvious that there was a clear distinction between the Sabal palms on Bonaire and those found on neighboring island Curacao. Thus, marking the first time *Sabal lougheediana* was identified and characterized.

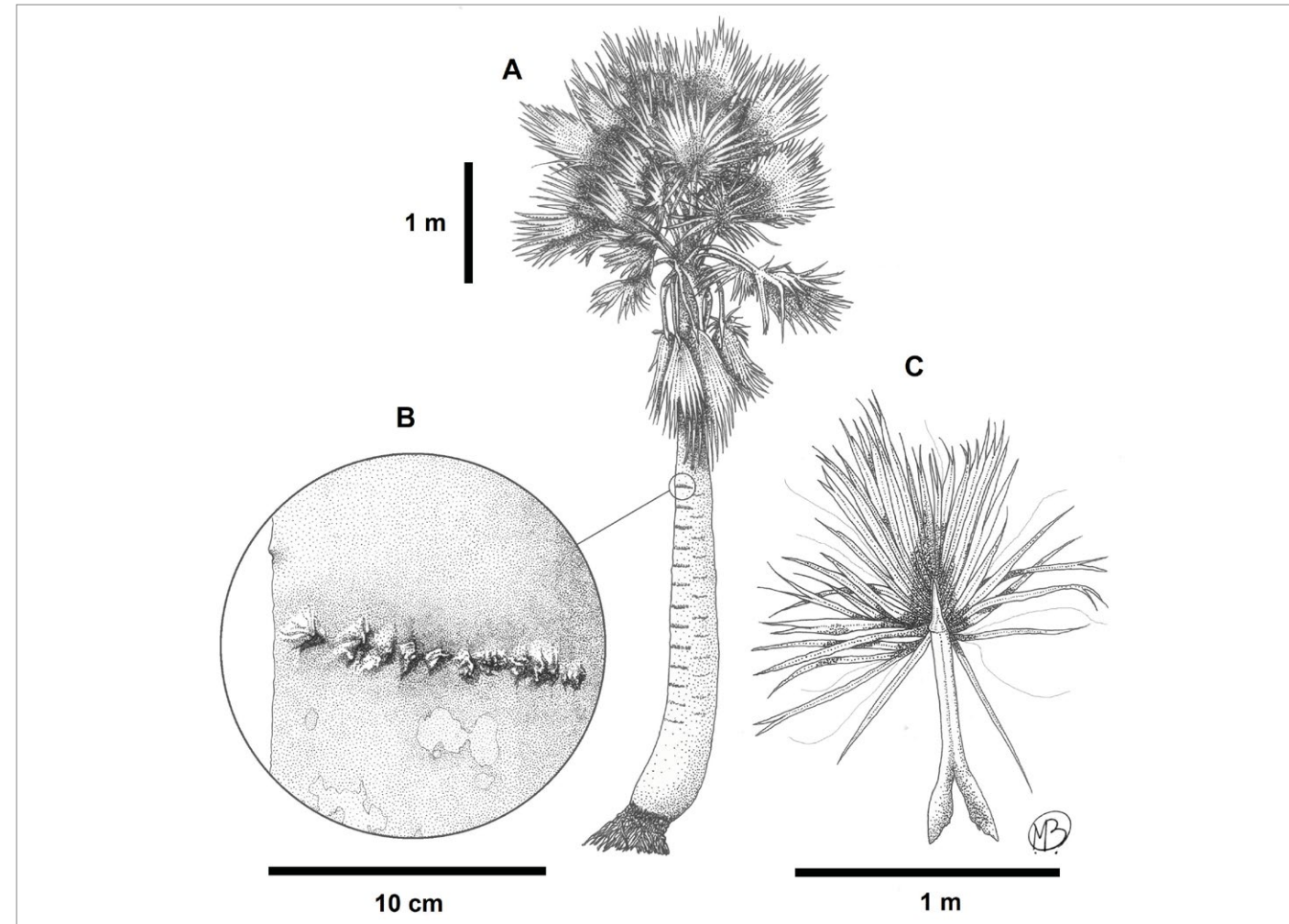


Figure 1: *Sabal lougheediana* (illustration: Barros). A. Habit. B. Detail of leaf scar. C. Leaf. (Griffith et al., 2019)

## Distinction from Other Palms

Although similar to its sister species *Sabal antillensis*, clear delineations can be made based on appearance. For example, the Bonairian Sabal or "Bonaire Palm" appears to be slightly taller than its' sister species and capable of holding up to 35 leaves at its crown. The leaves themselves are also quite different, with the Bonaire Palm having more spikey, stiff leaves when compared to the *S. antillensis* which has more flexible leaves. In addition, the Bonaire Palm has unique scarring, left from fallen leaves, which can be seen along the entire length of the trunk. Wild Bonaire Palms can only be found within a very small area, in the south of the island, west of Lac Bay and north of the Cargill Salt flats. Its ability to grow along the limestone flats is unique to this particular palm as its sister species is more notably found along the mudstone hills, at higher elevations. Its small range, coupled with the limited number of mature individuals has earned the *S. lougheediana* an IUCN Red List criteria rating of Critically Endangered. In fact, a 2018 survey identified only 25 reproductively mature individuals on the island (de Freitas et al., 2019). It now inhabits only about 20% of the land it was found on during a



previous survey conducted in 1979 by Winkelman, highlighting the fact that this unique palm has a dwindling population. Conservationists are concerned that grazing pressures from herbivores are threatening the ability for the palm to repopulate (de Freitas et al., 2019).

#### Securing a Future for the Bonaire Palm

To ensure this unique and important Bonaire Palm has a place in the future, it is important that conservation efforts be put into place to protect it. To start, physically protecting these palms against herbivores, such as installing fencing will give new Bonaire Palms a chance to grow. In addition, efforts to cultivate and grow additional palms in other areas can help expand its habitat and population.

To serve as a beacon of hope, conservation efforts for the *S. antillensis* have seen positive growth trends in recent years, showcasing how an increased public awareness and proper environmental management can serve in protecting these species. Clearly distinguishing these two species was an important first step in fully protecting this exclusive palm on Bonaire. Heightened awareness and a concerted effort to protect these few remaining specimens may be all that is required to reverse this trend and ensure this palm has a place within the Bonairian landscape for generations to come.

*Patrick Griffith and Quirijn Coolen with the Sabal Palm*  
Photo by: © Patrick Griffith



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