

Diego Molina

Secularise to Conserve. The History of the Wax Palm in Colombia



PLANT PERSPECTIVES

DOI: 10.3197/WHPPP.63845494909745

OPEN ACCESS CC BY 4.0 © THE AUTHOR

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the historical significance of the wax palm (*Ceroxylon quindiuensis*) in Colombia, focusing on its designation as the ‘National Tree’ in 1985 and the ensuing conservation efforts. Following this recognition, preserving the wax palm became crucial, necessitating a shift away from its traditional use during Palm Sunday of Holy Week. This process of secularisation involved collaboration among botanists who highlighted the palm’s endangered status; the press, which disseminated scientific findings; and local environmental groups that led conservation campaigns. These efforts included an ecological narrative that emphasised the relationships between the wax palm and other organisms such as the yellow-eared parrot (*Ognorhynchus icterotis*), which relies on the wax palm for survival. The paper highlights how changes in the cultural symbolism of plants can influence their conservation, either leading to extinction or protection.

KEYWORDS

Wax palm, conservation history, religious ethnobotany, plant humanities, natural national symbols



INTRODUCTION¹

On 16 September 1985, the Congress of the Republic passed a law adopting the wax palm (*Ceroxylon quindiuense*) as the Colombian national tree. The law did not specify the reasons that influenced the selection of this species from the rich plant inventory of the country. However, its four-point articles established certain measures for the palm’s conservation. The law empowered the National Government, ‘after the corresponding budgetary operations ... to acquire land in the central mountain range, which does not belong to the Nation, to constitute one or several national parks or flora sanctuaries in order to protect the national symbol and maintain it

- 1 This paper is a translation from Spanish of the paper ‘De Fetiche Santo a Símbolo Patrio: La Transformación Histórica de la Palma de Cera en Colombia’, *Historia Ambiental Latinoamericana y Caribeña HALAC* 13 (2) (2023): 248–80. Although this version is essentially the same as the original, it presents some changes in extension and focus in response to the suggestions and comments made by two anonymous reviewers.

in its natural habitat'. Likewise, and as a complementary measure, the bill strictly prohibited the felling of this species under penalty of arrest.²

The official recognition of the wax palm as the Colombian national tree followed a Latin American trend whereby, from 1920 onwards, different countries in the region had started to add plants to the inventory of national symbols, formed until then by flags, coats of arms and national anthems. For instance, the ahuehuete (*Taxodium distichum* var. *mexicanum*) was declared the national tree of México in 1921; and *Pinus oocarpa*, known as *pino ocote*, became the Honduran national tree in 1927. A few decades later, more precisely in 1959, Costa Rica named the *guanacastle* (*Enterolobium cyclocarpum*) as its national tree.³ In contrast to the well-known stories revolving around iconographic national symbols (i.e. flags and coat of arms),⁴ the incorporation of species of plants in the catalogue of Latin American national emblems has received little attention.⁵

Using archival material, in this paper, I explore how the official recognition of the wax palm as the Colombian national tree disincentivised its symbolic use linked to religious ritual, and how this symbolic shift was key in subsequent conservation efforts. In doing so, this paper offers a temporal perspective on the cultural dimension of trees, which although well studied in different social and ecological contexts, has, with some exceptions, been a theme rarely considered from a historic

- 2 Gobierno de Colombia 'Ley 61 de 1985, por la cual se adopta la palma de cera (*Ceroxylon Quindiuense*) como Árbol Nacional' [Bill 61 through which the wax palm is adopted as the National tree], *Sistema Único de Información Normativa*: <http://www.suin-juriscol.gov.co/viewDocument.asp?ruta=Leyes/1614170> (accessed 10 Oct. 2023).
- 3 C. González, 'Los Árboles y Las Flores Como Emblemas Nacionales En Países de América Latina y El Caribe: México y Países de América Central' [Trees and Flowers as National Emblems in Latin American and Caribbean Countries: Mexico and Central American Countries], *Revista Del Jardín Botánico Nacional* **32/33** (2011): 239–46.
- 4 N. González, 'The formation of political traditions and national symbols in nineteenth-century Latin America', *Romance Studies* **35** (1) (2017): 59–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02639904.2017.1306334>
- 5 Most of the publications on this matter address national trees from a descriptive perspective without considering the cultural processes present in the selection of certain species in different countries – see for instance González, 'Los Árboles y Las Flores Como Emblemas Nacionales En Países de América Latina y El Caribe'.

perspective.⁶ Analysing the different meanings of the wax palm in the history of Colombia offers a case study that enables us see how symbolic dimensions of trees change alongside social transformations that occurred during specific periods of time.

To understand the transformation of the wax palm in the imaginary of the Colombian nation, this article starts by briefly exploring the scientific discovery of the wax palm in the nineteenth century. Next, I present some of the common uses of this palm that granted this species special cultural status in the Andean region of Colombia. I emphasise the ritual use of these palms as the source of blessed bouquets for Palm Sundays, intensively used during the Catholic celebration of the Holy Week. Lastly, the central part of the paper explores how the recognition of the wax palm as Colombia's national tree in the 1980s triggered a resignification of this species consisting in its secularisation and later transformation into a conservation object, a process that was partially led by Colombian botanists.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE WAX PALM BY SCIENCE

Palms are not trees. Like grasses and lianas, palms are particular life forms grouped in the botanical family *Arecaceae*. With 3,645 species, this plant family is almost strictly confined to the tropics, and especially to the lowlands where its maximum species diversity is found. However, the wax palms belonging to the botanical genus *Ceroxylon* represent a unique case within the palm universe. Unlike most species of this family, which are usually found in the lowlands and midlands of the tropics, the eleven species of *Ceroxylon* grow in the cold highlands of the tropical Andes in Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. In the particular case of the Quindío wax palm (*Ceroxylon quindiuensis*), although there

6 Douglas Davies' work, *The Evocative Symbol of Trees*, is a seminal exploration of the symbolic significance of trees. While the literature on this topic is extensive, including diverse themes as presented in Sarah Johnson's edited volume *Trees*, there remains a gap in understanding the dynamics that have shifted perspectives on trees over time, see Douglas Davies, 'The evocative symbol of trees', in Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (eds), *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays On The Symbolic Representation, Design And Use Of Past Environments*: 9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 32–42; Sarah Johnson (ed.), *Trees*, Themes in Environmental History, v.5 (Knapwell, Cambridge: The White Horse Press, 2015).

is an isolated population in northern Peru, it is distributed almost exclusively in the mountains of the three Andean ranges of Colombia at altitudes above 2,000 metres. One of the most outstanding features of this species is that it can reach heights of more than fifty metres, making it one of the largest palm species on the planet.⁷

The botanical rarity of the wax palm soon caught the attention of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century naturalists. José Celestino Mutis, appointed by Charles III as leader of the Royal Botanical Expedition to the New Kingdom of Granada, reported the existence of this palm. In a letter of 1781 to the Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus, Mutis states that, although he had never seen them, he knew of some palms ‘that have tallow and wax’.⁸ Shortly after Mutis, the wax palm gained botanical recognition with the collections made by Aimé Bonpland and Alexander von Humboldt in 1801. Upon their arrival in Europe, Humboldt and Bonpland selected a collection of *Ceroxylon* from the Quindío in Colombia to present first to the academies of the Institute of France (National Academy of Art, Humanities and Science). Their choice to present the wax palm as the icon of their travel was driven by the unique geographical distribution of this species considered by them as ‘an extremely striking phenomenon of plant geography’.⁹ However, the uniqueness of the wax palm is more evident in the world of the French traveller Charles Saffray. In his 1861 travel chronicle published ten years later in the magazine *Le Tour du Monde*, Saffray observed how:

Everything is particular about this tree; it might be said to have been created for the scorching shores of the Pacific, but it also inhabits temperate or cold climates, and thrives in the mountains of Quindío and Tolima, between eighteen hundred and two thousand nine hundred metres above sea level. Where plants would seem to be less sensitive to cold, or would take on a stunted form, the one I am talking about has a fifty-metre-high stipe, a graceful and elegant column crowned by a vast capital of tufts.¹⁰

7 M. Sanín and G. Galeano, ‘A revision of the Andean wax palms, *Ceroxylon* (Arecaceae)’, *Phytotaxa* **34** (1) (2011): 1–64, <https://doi.org/10.11646/phytotaxa.34.1.1>

8 S. Madriñán and R. Schultes, ‘Colombia’s national tree: *Ceroxylon quindiuense* and its relatives’, *Eleaeis* **7** (1) (1995): 35–56.

9 M. Dettelbach, ‘The stimulations of travel: Humboldt’s physiological construction of the tropics’, in F. Driver and L. Martins (eds), *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 43–58.

10 C. Saffray, *Viaje a Nueva Granada* [Travel to the Nueva Granada], trans. Ricardo Pardo, Biblioteca Popular de Cultura Colombiana (Bogotá: Ministerio de

Despite the particularities of the wax palm, identifying its taxonomical position within the Linnean classification system was not an easy task. After a series of taxonomic amendments and discussions involving prominent naturalists such as Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck and Augustin de Candolle, the botanical genus was given the name *Ceroxylon*, initially proposed by Bonpland because the species produced wax (*cera* in Latin). However, the mismatch between the plant's description in travel accounts and botanical collections created a taxonomic conundrum that was only resolved in 1976 when botanists Harold E. More and Anthony Anderson, after analysing abundant evidence, concluded that two species of wax palm coexisted in the Quindío mountains: *Ceroxylon alpinum*, growing between 1,500 and 2,000 metres altitude, and the larger *Ceroxylon quindiuense*, growing between 2,000 and 3,000 metres.¹¹

THE PALM'S WAX

The initial encounters of Europeans with this palm did not only highlight its biological characteristics. Its stem, covered with a useful resin, was one of its most talked-about characteristics. At an early stage of the conquest of the American continent by Europeans, Captain D. Bernardo de Vargas Machuca in his book on warlike matters in the Indies mentions that, among the 'fruitful trees that grow in the mountains without profit', there are palms that 'produce a white resin that when melted with a little wax stirred together, axes and candles are made from it'.¹² The extent of the use of palm wax in colonial times is not clear. However, José Celestino Mutis, in 1785, showed interest in what he explicitly called the 'new branch of extracting palm wax' and

Educación Nacional, 1948), p. 279.

- 11 On the taxonomic conundrum of the wax palm and the botanists involved, see Armando Dugand, 'Palmas de Colombia: Clave Diagnóstica de Los Géneros y Nomina de Las Especies Conocidas' [Palms of Colombia: Diagnostic Key to the Genera and List of Known Species], *Caldasia* 1 (1) (1940): 20–84; Miriam Bomhard, '*Ceroxylon Ferrugineum* André, the Salento Waxpalm', *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences* 33 (1) (1943): 1–8.
- 12 D. Bernardo De Vargas Machuca, *Milicia y Descripción de Las Indias* [Militia and Description of the Indies]. *Reimpreso Fielmente Según La Primera Edición Hecha En Madrid En 1599* (Madrid: Librería de Victoriano Suarez, 1892), p. 107.

through a collaborator received a sample of the inflorescences of the palm accompanied by a description observing how

The palm that gives the wax is the one that was known here by the name of *Chuapa*, as tall and taller than the tallest coconut palm. All the surface of its trunk is scraped and the dust collected is used to produce the wax.¹³

William Purdie, a Scottish ‘plant hunter’ who travelled through Colombia in 1846, left interesting evidence about the extraction of the resin from this palm. Purdie says that, according to the information obtained by his guides, ‘to obtain the wax the tree is felled’. That the palm was felled, as Purdie mentioned, runs counter to the iconographic evidence left by fellow plant hunter Édouard André. Accompanying his travel account published in *Le Tour du Monde* there is an engraving showing a man climbing on the palm while scraping its resin (Figure 1). While these two versions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they clearly signify two distinct ways of relating to the palm that merit further study, which is beyond the scope of this research. After cutting down the palm, Purdie revealed that 25 pounds of wax were obtained from each tree felled and that, in a day’s work, a man could fell and scrape two trees, i.e. fifty pounds. Similarly, obtaining the resin from the palms does not seem to have been an isolated event. Purdie himself notes that ‘after being scraped [the wax] is simply melted and poured into *calabazos* [pots made of calabash skin] for use by villagers in the vicinity of the Tolima mountain range. It is sold in the city of Ibagué at the foot of the Quindío at three pence or half a real a pound; it is in considerable demand, but is abundant and easy to obtain’.¹⁴

The resin obtained from the palms, and particularly from *C. quindiuensis*, was widely used in the production of candles that supplied the lighting needs of rural populations until the electrification of their settlements.¹⁵ Additionally, palm wax candles played a role in the illumination

- 13 J. Mutis, *Diario de Observaciones de José Celestino Mutis (1760-1790)* [Diary of Observations of José Celestino Mutis (1760-1790)], vol. II, Instituto Colombiano de Cultura Hispánica. Compilado por Guillermo Hernández de Alba. Colección José Celestino Mutis: 1-2 (Bogotá: Editorial Minerva, 1958), p. 665.
- 14 S. Díaz, *La palma de cera, árbol nacional* [The wax palm, national tree], (Credencial historia n. 39) <https://www.banrepcultural.org/biblioteca-virtual/credencial-historia/numero-139/la-palma-de-cera-arbol-nacional> (accessed 30 Aug. 2022).
- 15 E. Pérez-Arbeláez, *Plantas Útiles de Colombia* [Colombian useful plants], 4a. ed (Santafé de Bogotá: Litografía Arco, 1978), p. 570.



FIGURE 1.

Taylor and A. Ferdinandus (after sketch by É. André). Extraction of palm wax, 1878.
Source: Édouard André, 'L'Amérique Équinoxiale (Colombie-Équateur-Pérou); *Le Tour Du Monde. Nouveau Journal Des Voyages* (Paris: Hachette, 1879), p. 102.

of religious services of the Catholic Church whose canons had forbidden the use of candles made of tallow in the liturgic ceremonies.¹⁶ Purdie wrote that, in the Andean region of Colombia today, palm wax was used in the making of ‘candles to be offered to the saints and the Virgin [in church]’. However, although wax palm candles represented an alternative to those made out of tallow, and despite Purdie mentioning that wax from palms was ‘easy to obtain’, supply of the quantities needed to produce candles for commercial purposes seems to have been limited.¹⁷ As a result, the illumination of churches near the wax palms was based on importation of the not very economical beeswax. Some years later, in 1857, the Scottish botanist, journalist and Presbyterian minister, Isaac Holton, observed that beeswax already made into candles was sold at an ‘extravagant’ price of three dollars per pound.¹⁸ Although candles made from palm wax might have had only a marginal role in Catholic rituals, its use as a blessed bouquet gave this species a unique symbolic position within Colombia’s symbolic repertoire.

THE ‘RAMO BENDITO’ (PALM SUNDAY BLESSED BOUQUET)

A key element in the history of the wax palm in Colombia is the use of its leaves in the Holy Week bouquets. According to the Gospels, on the Sunday before being crucified, Jesus Christ made his public entry into Jerusalem. According to John (12:12–13), a crowd awaited him, acclaiming him as the Son of God and welcoming him with ‘branches of palm trees’. The use of palm branches as a greeting seems to have been part of a long tradition. In the Old Testament book of Maccabees, the Hebrew leader Simon is received in Jerusalem ‘with thanksgiving and palm branches’.¹⁹ As recognised by various works addressing the botany of the Bible, the palm of this holy book was the Date palm (*Phoenix*

16 D. Sugrañes, *Guía del clero en las divinas alabanzas, ó sea, Explicación de las rúbricas del rezo divino: según el breviario romano y decretos de la sagrada congregación de ritos* [Guide of the clergy in divine praises] (Barcelona: Imprenta de los Herederos de la V. Pla, 1857).

17 Madriñan and Schultes, ‘Colombia’s national tree’, 41.

18 I. Holton, *New Granada. Twenty Months in the Andes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1857), p. 365.

19 ‘Bible Gateway’, 1 Marcos 21, Macabeos 13, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Macabeos%2013&version=DHH> (accessed 1 Aug. 2022).

dactylifera), abundant in today's Palestine and a recurrent motif among different cultures historically settled there.²⁰

Turned into a symbol of the 'triumph and victory' of Christ,²¹ the fronds of palms would become entrenched within the rituals of Holy Week in the Catholic world. Recognised as *Dominica in Ramis Palmarum*, this tradition expanded wherever the Catholic religion rooted, in spite of the fact that, in many regions, the availability of palm branches was null or scarce. In the case of England, for instance, in his 1873 *Natural History of the Bible*, H.M. Tristram observed how parishioners carried branches of willows and called them 'palms'.²² Tropical America hosts most of the species of palms in the world; hence, once the Catholic religion was transplanted into this region with the European invasion of 1492, the use of fronds of palms as part of the Holy Week bouquets was restored. With 231 species, Colombia has the highest diversity of palms on the planet.²³ It is not surprising, then, that other species of palms have also been historically used in this celebration. This is especially true in lowlands where wax palm does not grow. However, in the Andean region, which is the most populated of the country, the palms of the *Ceroxylon* botanical genus were widely used as a blessed bouquet

- 20 Palm trees and leaves were used as motifs by King Salomon in Temple engraving and sculptures. In the Capernum synagogue, some friezes have been found on which are carved palm branches (3rd century BC). The Maccabees (2nd century BC) used the palm as the emblem of victory on their coin, while Roman coins of the first Century AD depicted a woman seated under a palm in an image for the captured Judea – see Michael Zohary, *Plants of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 60.
- 21 Eugenio Arias, *Explicación de Los Oficios de Semana Santa, Sacada de Varios Autores Aprobados Por La Iglesia* [Explanation of the Holy Week Services, Taken from Various Authors Approved by the Church] (Medellín: Editorial Católica, 1933), https://bibliotecapiloto.janium.net/janium-bin/janium_zui.pl?fn=36264&jzd=/janium/Documentos/AP/BPP-D-XIX-0109/d.jzd
- 22 H.B. Tristram, *The Natural History of the Bible: Being a Review of the Physical Geography, Geology, and Meteorology of the Holy Land: With a Description of Every Animal and Plant Mentioned in Holy Scripture*, 3rd ed., rev. corrected (London: R. Clay, sons and Taylor, 1873), p. 383.
- 23 On Colombia's species of palms, see Gloria Galeano and Rodrigo Bernal, *Palmas de Colombia: Guía de Campo* [Palms of Colombia: Field Guide] (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2010), p. 53.



FIGURE 2.

Gabriel Carvajal, *Domingo de Ramos* [Palm Sunday], 1973, 6x9 cm.

Source: Courtesy of Archivo Fotográfico Biblioteca Pública Piloto, Medellín BPP-F-018-0102.

in the Palm Sunday celebration (Figure 2).²⁴ Nonetheless, to this day, the underlying reasons why the fronds of the wax palm were turned into a religious object are still not clear.

24 In 1943, the botanist Lorenzo Uribe noted in his book on the teaching of botany that another Andean cold forest palm called *palma zancona* (*Prestoea acuminata*) 'supplies the palms for Palm Sunday', Gloria Galeano and Rodrigo Bernal explain in their Field Guide to the Palms of Colombia that this species is used as a blessed bouquet in the southern region of Colombia where 'large populations of this palm are intensively harvested each year during this season'; Édouard André, garden designer and 'plant hunter', on his visit to Cali in 1876, observed how in this region 'young fronds' of *Attalea butyracea* were used for this religious celebration – see Uribe, *Botánica. Texto Para Bachillerato Conforme Con El Programa Oficial* [Botany. Text for Baccalaureate in accordance with the official syllabu] (Bogotá: Editorial Librería Voluntad, S.A., 1943), p. 244; André, 'L'Amérique Équinoxiale (Colombie-Équateur-Pérou)', *Le Tour Du Monde. Nouveau Journal Des Voyages* (Paris: Hachette., 1878), p. 136; Galeano and Bernal, *Palmas de Colombia*, p. 507.

One of the first mentions of the use of *Ceroxylon* fronds as a blessed bouquet comes from an untitled novel published in 1860 in the newspaper *El Mosaico*. In the novel, two characters attending the theatre discuss the existence of palms that are in their way. One of them, called Pablo, remarks: ‘You see, Señor Don Diego, what a beautiful palm tree’, in response to which his companion asks: ‘really, and what palm is that?’ Pablo then gives a botanical lesson on the Andean *Ceroxylon*, citing Humboldt as a source of information. His interlocutor then inquires ‘And where do you see that palm?’, to which Pablo replies, ‘Every year you see its leaves in the Palm Sunday processions’.²⁵ This direct mention of the use of the wax palm in Holy Week celebrations indicates that, by the middle of the nineteenth century, this type of plant was already under some degree of exploitation linked to its ritual uses. This is so despite the fact that many Bogotianians were unable to link the palms they saw in parks with the bouquets used in the religious celebration.

Despite having plots, patios and areas covered with spontaneous vegetation,²⁶ photographic evidence from early twentieth century suggest that parishioners did not use other types of branches (see Figure 3). Consequently, the use of palms, at least in the growing urban environments of Colombia, depended to a large extent on those rural inhabitants who conserved the ethnobotanical knowledge necessary for the extraction of branches. The celebration of Palm Sunday, then, acted as a pole of attraction not only for people close to the population centres who attended the liturgical celebrations, but also for those who travelled to sell the *Ceroxylon* fronds.²⁷ In 1955, Eduardo Santa, in his article ‘A

25 ‘Las Palmas (Fragmento de Una Novela)’ [Palms (Fragment of a Novel)], *El Mosaico, Álbum Neo-Granadino*, 10 Nov. 1860.

26 Diego Molina, ‘Urban spaces, plants, and people in the nineteenth-century Bogotá, Colombia’, *Economic Botany* 75 (3–4) (2021): 268–86, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12231-021-09524-5>

27 Until their industrialisation, Latin American cities relied heavily on the extraction and commercialisation of plant and animal resources from the countryside and various nearby ecosystems. An important and often overlooked part of this process was the deep vernacular biodiversity knowledge held by peasants/vendors who supplied the city with a wide variety of natural products, see M. Karasch, ‘Provedores, vendedores, sirvientes y esclavos’ [Suppliers, sellers, servants and slaves], in L. Hoberman and S. Socolow (eds), *Ciudades y sociedad en Latinoamérica colonial* [Cities and society in colonial Latin America], Sección de obras de historia (Argentina: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993), pp. 287–330.

Week in the Village' about Holy Week in Medellín (Colombia), observes how

Today is Palm Sunday. The village has dawned with the joy of a humid morning ... The peasants have already begun to arrive in the village with the vegetable treasury of their palms, which are spreading a soft perfume, a delicate aroma. It is the scent of the *sierra*.²⁸

In this case, the *sierra* [the mountain] is what the city is not, from where the peasants mentioned by the author extracted the palm branches.

Due to their symbolic importance, Holy Week celebrations were profusely photographed, leaving us documentary evidence of the religious use of wax palm fronds during the first decades of the twentieth century. Judging by the quantity of bouquets sold in a single Bogotá market in 1945 (Figure 3), it is possible to speculate that, by then, the extraction of palm fronds to supply religious demands must have had a significant ecological impact on the palm populations. As recognised later by botanists, the extraction of the young fronds of these palms halts the development of immature individuals, undermining the natural population.²⁹ Although data on this seasonal market are not available, current data from Ecuador, where the use of wax palms (*Ceroxylon alpinum* and *C. echinulatum*) is still current, may shed light on this issue. In Ecuador, palm leaf collection begins three weeks before Palm Sunday. Using data from 2009, Ecuadorian researchers reported that each harvester collects 160 buds per day, and at the end of the harvesting period can reach 3,000 buds, which represents a market of approximately half a million dollars.³⁰ Given the demographic differences between Quito today and Bogotá in Figure 2, it is impossible to directly compare the data. However, the information from Ecuador gives an indication of the extent of this extractive practice and its possible ecological consequences.

28 E. Santa, 'Una Semana Santa en la Aldea' [A Holy Week in the Village], *Lanzadera (Fábricas Del Coltejer)*, April 1955.

29 Gloria Galeano and Rodrigo Bernal, 'Las Palmas de Cera En Peligro de Extinción' [Wax Palms In Danger of Extinction], *Colombia: Ciencia y Tecnología* 2 (2) (1984): 26–27.

30 R. Valencia et al., *Palmas ecuatorianas: biología y uso sostenible* [Ecuadorian palms: biology and sustainable use] (Quito: Herbario QCA de la PUCE, 2013), p. 127.



FIGURE 3.

Venta de ramos [Sale of Palm Sunday Bouquets in Bogotá], 1945.

Source: Courtesy of Museo de Bogotá (Mdb) Fondo Daniel Rodríguez, Mdb 16743.

The impact on wax palm populations went unnoticed during the first half of the twentieth century, when environmental concerns were not part of the social discussion. However, this practice must have had obvious effects on palm populations. In contrast with trees and bushes, where trimming can lead to robust growth, the removal of photosynthetic structures (namely fronds) in palms slows the growth of young individuals, causing the shrinking of a population whose individuals require more

than seventy years to start their reproductive cycle.³¹ But leaf removal alone does not explain the reduction in the populations of this species. Another reason was that, despite their durability, the blessed bouquets were not generally reused every year. As dictated by the Catholic tradition, a few days before Lent, the parishioners were supposed to deliver the bouquet blessed during the previous Holy Week, which, once in the church, was reduced to ashes to be used in the imposition of the cross on Ash Wednesday. In this ritual, the priest marks a cross with ashes (from the blessed bouquets) on the forehead of the parishioners forty days before Holy Week as a symbol of the fasting, abstinence and penance associated with the celebration of Lent. The incineration of blessed bouquets forced parishioners to buy a new one every year, which naturally meant a systematic extraction of *Ceroxylon* fronds.

Between its blessing and its delivery to the church to produce ashes, the bouquet was used as a mystical object of protection. The *Christian Community* primer produced by the Ministry of National Education in 1987 states how so-called 'Popular Religious Customs' included, among others, taking the blessed bouquet home as 'a symbol of Christ's triumph in our daily lives'.³² However, along with being a representative element of Christ's triumph, the blessed bouquet was ascribed magical characteristics that appear recurrently in novels and tales. For example, Medardo Rivas, in his 1946 novel *Los Trabajadores de Tierra Caliente* [The lowland workers], provides a curious example of the use of the bouquet as a magical amulet. Rivas recounts that he had set out to access the hidden riches that 'primitive Indians' had deposited in a lagoon near the village of Guataquí. Given that these riches were guarded by a kind of monstrous divinity called the Mohán, Rivas was accompanied by a group of people who, encouraged by the desire for treasure, set out to confront the monster. Rivas then comments that, among his companions, 'some carried spears, others shotguns, most of them machetes; and the women rosaries, scapulars and *blessed bouquets*' [emphasis added].³³ The blessed branch was thus used to fight against dark forces and natural phenomena. The palm frond hung in the window is used to

31 Galeano and Bernal, *Palmas de Colombia*, p. 34.

32 Ministerio de Educación Nacional, *Comunidad Cristiana* [Christian Community], 12th ed. (Bogotá: Editorial Andes, 1987), p. 12.

33 M. Rivas, *Los Trabajadores de Tierra Caliente* [Lowland's Workers] (Bogotá: Prensas de la Universidad Nacional, 1946).

ward off thunderstorms,³⁴ while its presence in the domestic space keeps enemies away. The presbyter Eugenio Arias Álzate observes how:

In any place where these blessed bouquets were, those who inhabit the houses get God's blessing, the common enemy is driven away, the storms flee the fields and the enemies of the world are defeated, as happened to Charles II king of France, with the palm sent to him by Pope John VIII, with which he defeated, not only the visible enemies of his crown, but also the invisible ones.³⁵

In 1992, a press article on the relationship between the wax palm and the blessed bouquet sums up the magical use of the palm frond well: 'Apart from the solemn homage to Christ, the blessed palm has for centuries been for Catholics like an additional saint. It is a shield against storms, evil spirits and fears. The blessed bouquet frightens the devil, and is even good as a remedy'.³⁶ The bouquet blessed each Holy Week became a powerful amulet, that, despite its potential durability, was reduced to ashes every year. Repeated annually, the extraction of palm fronds would systematically affect the populations of this botanical rarity. Already evident at the end of the twentieth century, the possible extinction of the wax palm would eventually contribute to its resignification as a national tree.

THE IMPLICIT USE OF WAX PALM AS THE COLOMBIAN NATIONAL TREE

In addition to its use in the religious celebration of Holy Week, after independence from Spain, wax palms also began to be considered an emblem of the young nation. In the same fragment of the aforementioned unnamed novel published in *El Mosaico* in 1860, one of the characters points out:

I have a project concerning palms for when they make me alderman of the Cabildo, and that is to move the market square to another location and to enclose an area with iron grilles around the statue in Bolívar square and to

34 On the use of the Palm Sunday bouquet to fight thunderstorms, see Francisco de Paula Rendon, *Inocencia* [Innocence] (Bogotá: Editorial Minerva, 1900), p. 10. <https://babel.banrepcultural.org/digital/collection/p17054coll10/id/2519/rec/65>

35 Arias, *Explicación de Los Oficios de Semana Santa*, p. 8.

36 Redacción, 'Sustitución del Ramo' [Bouquet Replacement], *El Tiempo*, 10 April 1992, sec. archivo: <https://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-89779>.

plant eighty or a hundred wax palms there and then many of the most exquisite Andean plants. Don't you think that's good, Don Diego? [To which his counterpart replied] 'Magnificent! The hero of the Andes! A monumental statue adorned with monumental palms!'³⁷

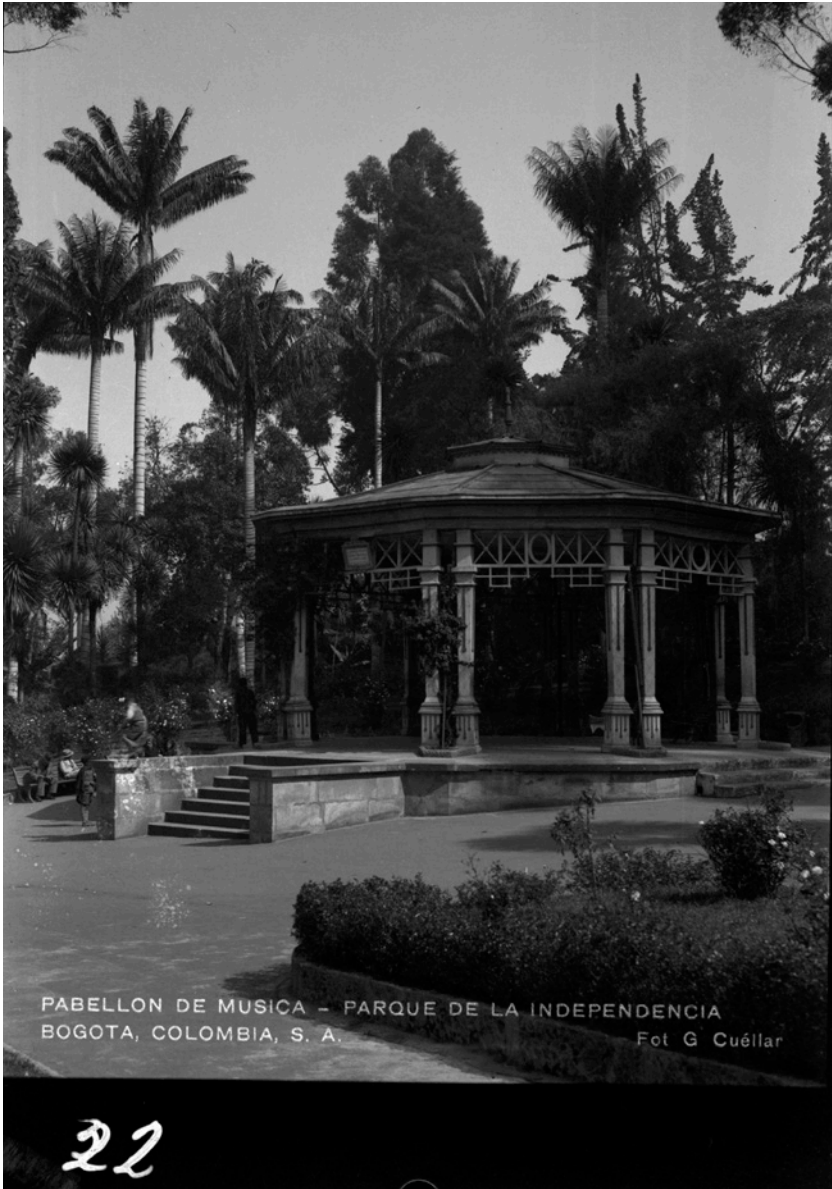
The character's words were almost prophetic. As part of the modernisation of Bogotá, the old colonial squares were landscaped and the local elites opened parks.³⁸ Decorated with statues of patriotic heroes and with ornamental plants, these gardens gave the city its symbolic status as the centre of the republic. Within the plant repertoire chosen to ornament the city, wax palms occupied a privileged position. Introduced to the city in the mid-nineteenth century by Zenón Padilla, wax palms acquired a special national status above many other species of the diverse Andean flora. In the 1880s, the Plaza de Bolívar [Bolívar Square], the symbolic centre of the nation, was transformed into a garden; there, the self-taught gardener Casiano Salcedo planted at least one palm around the figure of Bolívar. A few decades later, the palm was already part of the capital's urban flora. When in 1910, the conservative government inaugurated the Parque de la Independencia [Independence Park] to mark the 100th anniversary of independence from Spain, wax palms played a central role in its ornamentation (Figure 4).³⁹

The implicit and non-official use of the wax palm as a national symbol began to solidify four decades later. In the mid-twentieth century, Colombian botanists examined possible options that could serve as the national tree. According to botanist Enrique Pérez Arbeláez, this species had to meet the condition of being easily adaptable to other climates since the idea of having a national tree was to send it as a 'vegetal diplomat' to be planted around the globe. Among the candidates for diplomatic duty, Arbeláez first proposed the pomegranate (*Punica granatum*), noting that 'Nueva Granada was the name by which our homeland entered international life'. In a country where the Andes had been the source of most symbols (e.g., the Condor in the Coat

37 'Las Palmas (Fragmento de Una Novela)'.

38 Diego Molina, *Planting a City in the Tropical Andes: Plants and People in Bogotá, 1880 to 1920*, Routledge Research on Gardens and History (New York, NY: Routledge, 2025).

39 J. García, 'Bogotá Ahora Medio Siglo' [Bogotá Half a Century Ago], in N. Bayona (ed.), *El Alma de Bogotá*, 2nd ed., Biblioteca de Bogotá (Bogotá: Villegas Editores, 1988), pp. 170–71.



PABELLON DE MUSICA - PARQUE DE LA INDEPENDENCIA
BOGOTA, COLOMBIA, S. A. Fot G Cuéllar

22

FIGURE 4.
Gumercindo Cuéllar, Wax palms at the Independence Park, 1930, negative 9x13 cm.
Source: Courtesy of Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango (BLAA), Colección Fotográfica
Gumercindo Cuéllar, FT1414.

of Arms), Pérez Arbeláez interestingly also included in his list lowland tropical trees such as the cashew (*Anacardium excelsum*), jacaranda (*Jacaranda* sp.), erythrina (*Erythrina poeppigiana*), coral tree (*Erythrina fusca*), yellow trumpet tree (*Handroanthus chrysanthus*), and the divi-divi (*Libidibia coriaria*). However, Pérez Arbeláez emphasises the selection of large species as the national tree and mentions that in his ‘concrete opinion’, the best species would be some of the palm species such as *Syagrus sancona*, *Attalea butyracea*, *Attalea maripa*, and the wax palm of Quindío (*Ceroxylon quindiuense*).⁴⁰

A year later, botanist Armando Dugand also leaned towards the wax palm among the multiple options proposed by Pérez Arbeláez. At the Third Latin American Botanical Congress, Dugand officially proposed the wax palm, highlighting the botanical singularity and usefulness of this species:

The wax palm as a true aesthetic heritage of the nation and as one of the most typical floristic notabilities of Colombian vegetation, not only because it is a prominent and characteristic element of the Andean landscape but also because of the wax it produces, the extraordinariness of its habitat, which widely exceeds the common geographical-altitudinal limits in the palm family, besides being the most beautiful and tallest within the genus, since it can exceed 50 metres in height.⁴¹

From the 1970s, the wax palm begins to appear within the iconographic ensemble representing the nation. It thus appears in multiple writings, records, documents and postage stamps (see Figure 5). By the end of that decade, the palm is already widely recognised by the intellectual and political elite as a botanical symbol of Colombia. In 1979, the national government, through Colcultura, an organisation then affiliated with the Ministry of National Education, published an album compiled by Joaquín Piñeros Corpas entitled *Los Símbolos Nacionales* [The National Symbols], which already explicitly positions the wax palm as a national symbol.⁴² As the palm slowly consolidates within different layers of Colombian society as a symbol of the nation, reports also begin to emerge in the press about the worrying deterioration of its populations.

40 E. Arbeláez, *Paisajes, Tierras y Trabajos* [Landscapes, Lands and Jobs] (Bogotá: Editorial Minerva, 1948), pp. 199–201.

41 Díaz, ‘La palma de cera, árbol nacional’.

42 Ibid..



FIGURE 5.

Wax palm portrayed in a 1981 postage stamp. Source: Banco de la República, Colección de Estampilla, FE010655.

Also in 1979, the Radio Newspaper *El Clarín* of Medellín warned about the danger of the wax palm's extinction. Although the radio report does not mention the use of palm fronds in Holy Week bouquets as a cause of possible extinction, it does emphasise habitat transformation and especially that 'it has not been promoted enough, official entities do not investigate or promote it, nor do they reproduce it'.⁴³ Despite this concern for the national tree, it would only be in 1985, when the official declaration of the Quindío wax palm as a national symbol was made, that initial conservation guidelines would be established.

43 'Noticia de La Tierra' [Earth's News], *Radio periódico El Clarín*, 21 Sept. 1979, Fondo Radio periódico *El Clarín*, tomo 683, folio 454, Archivo Histórico de Medellín, Medellín [AHM].

SECULARISE TO CONSERVE

The late recognition of the wax palm as the national tree coincided with scientific awakening of awareness about the risks facing this species due to habitat loss and the religious use of its fronds. In 1984, a year before its official declaration, botanists Gloria Galeano and Rodrigo Bernal published an article titled ‘Wax Palms in Danger of Extinction’, expressing their concern about the general neglect of wax palm species and reflecting on how the destruction of Andean forests, their natural habitat, endangered many species. Regarding the use of these palms in the crafting of ‘blessed bouquets’, the naturalists reflected on the case of *Ceroxylon flexuosum* (now considered as *Ceroxylon vogelianum*). Galeano and Bernal found an individual of this species in a house in a rural area of Medellín. Notified by locals that the palms were once abundant in the area and that, despite efforts, they had not found more individuals than those cultivated, the botanists pointed to the use of young leaves in the crafting of Palm Sunday bouquets as a cause of local extinction.⁴⁴ While the use of palms as blessed bouquets was not the sole cause of the possible extinction of wax palms, this practice did contribute (as explained above) to the erosion of populations of this species.

The recognition of the wax palm as the national tree of Colombia encouraged some conservation measures. Restrictions on its logging, as well as the intention to create a national park, seemed to align with the requests of scientists like Galeano and Bernal. However, these initial and difficult-to-implement measures did not halt the transformation of the palm’s habitat and did not prevent the use of its fronds in the religious celebration of Palm Sunday. To achieve that, it was necessary to discourage its use, which involved its desacralisation. This process gained momentum from the early 1990s when a series of circumstances converged to promote the conservation of this species.

Firstly, in 1991, a new liberal-leaning constitution was established in Colombia. It recognised the country as a secular state. At least on paper,

44 G. Galeano and R. Bernal, ‘Las Palmas de Cera En Peligro de Extinción’ [Wax Palms In Danger of Extinction], *Colombia: Ciencia y Tecnología* 2 (2) (1984): 26–27; A. Bonpland, ‘Memoria. Sobre una palmera que da cera, y que ha servido para establecer un nuevo género [Memory. About a palm tree that produces wax, and that has served to establish a new genus]. Leída en la primera clase del Instituto, El 14 Brumario, Año 13, Por El Sr. Bonpland’.

the new *Carta Magna* reduced the influence that the Catholic Church had had on Colombian society until then. Additionally, the new constitution echoed the growing concern about environmental degradation. In Article 79, the new constitution recognised the ‘Right to a Healthy Environment’. Paradoxically, the same religious power that the new constitution sought to limit also had a big influence on the conservation of these palms. At the 23rd World Day of Peace in 1990, Pope John Paul II’s words on environmental conservation ultimately exerted an influence, albeit indirectly, on the desacralisation of the palm. In his message titled ‘Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation’, the head of the Catholic Church defined the ecological crisis as a moral problem. He emphasised that, when humanity strays from the Creator’s design, disorder results, inevitably affecting the rest of creation. Anticipating by a quarter of a century Pope Francis’ Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’ On Care for Our Common Home*,⁴⁵ John Paul II reiterated how ‘delicate ecological balances are upset by the uncontrolled destruction of animal and plant species’, which, according to the Pope, even if done in the name of progress and wellbeing, certainly does not benefit humanity.⁴⁶

Supported by the Pope’s words, the wax palm found an ally for its desacralisation process in the press. However, in a historically conservative country with a predominantly Catholic population, journalists needed to be assertive to avoid any defence of the wax palm being identified as an attack on religious practices. In an article published before Holy Week of 1992, titled ‘The Substitution of the Bouquet’, the editorial staff of the newspaper *El Tiempo* explained how ‘We do not want to offend God or His representatives on Earth or, in general, Christianity, but we dare to request the substitution of the palm.’⁴⁷ They then used the words of John Paul II to argue in favour of this replacement. Three years later, when Colombia joined the Convention on Biological Diversity in

45 Iglesia Católica. Papa (2013 - : Francisco) and Papa Francisco, *Laudato Si’: Carta Encíclica Del Sumo Pontífice Francisco: A Los Obispos, a Los Presbíteros Y a Los Diáconos, a Las Personas Consagradas Y a Todos Los Fieles Laicos Sobre El Cuidado De La Casa Común* (Lima: Paulinas, 2015).

46 Message of his holiness Pope John Paul II for the celebration of the world day of peace, 1 Jan. 1990: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html (accessed 16 Aug. 2022).

47 Redacción, ‘Sustitución del Ramo’.

February 1995, an intense campaign orchestrated by the press and environmental circles sought alternatives to wax palm fronds in the Palm Sunday celebration.⁴⁸ That year, parishioners used white handkerchiefs and flowers as substitutes for the palm. The call was quite successful due to the clergy's adherence to the ecological mood, encouraging the use of these alternatives, which were promoted in most parishes across the country. That year, the Auxiliary Bishop of Medellín, Monsignor Darío Monsalve Mejía, expressed that 'although the wax palm, a traditional and beautiful bouquet, is in extinction, our faith should be alive, fresh, and joyful'. Therefore, the Auxiliary Bishop recommended 'letting our national palm rest and resorting to other branches, such as pines or eucalyptus', and based on the Gospel of Luke, he asserted that 'even other non-vegetal signs such as flags and handkerchiefs' should be used.⁴⁹

But Monsignor Monsalve would soon withdraw his blessing from the use of non-vegetal elements in the celebration of Palm Sunday. After the president of the Episcopal Conference, Monsignor Pedro Rubiano Sáenz, ordered the use of other vegetal species instead of handkerchiefs, the Auxiliary Bishop of Medellín, Monsignor Monsalve, declared in a more emphatic tone that:

Today we want to correct that initiative and rescue the palm sign. We cannot yield to a misunderstood environmentalism, which absolutises nature with a primitive sense. We cannot surrender to a neo-religious trend that intends, under various pretexts, to undermine all the signs and expressions of the Christian faith ... We invite all Catholic faithful to equip themselves with palms, branches, flowers, or vegetal elements from our flora, to make a colourful manifestation of our hope in the victory of the kingdom of Christ.⁵⁰

In his statement, the Monsignor Monsalve Mejía indicates that the use of vegetal alternatives, such as 'leaves of other palms, green or dry branches, and flower arrangements', was permitted, and emphasizes that 'the palm sign should not be changed for flags or handkerchiefs, nor should the Palm Sunday procession become an ecological march

48 Signature of the Convention on Biological Diversity by the state of Colombia: <https://www.cancilleria.gov.co/convenio-sobre-diversidad-biologica-cbd> (accessed 23 Aug. 2022).

49 D. Monsalve, 'Los Ramos Del Domingo' [Sunday Palms], *El Colombiano*, 2 April 1995, E.

50 C. Chaves, '¿Ambientalismo o Tradición?' [Environmentalism or Tradition?], *El Mundo*, 29 March 1995.

or tree day'. Furthermore, Monsalve calls on parish priests to distribute the palms to parishioners and on merchants to sell them. However, this request to distribute branches among the people would be dismissed given the economic burden that the celebration of Holy Week represents for each parish when it comes to painting the church, and purchasing a larger quantity of wafers and wine to cover the higher attendance of believers.⁵¹ Therefore, the church's position was to stick with vegetal branches, regardless of the species, opening the possibility of continuing to use endangered species. At least that's how a journalist perceived it in March 1996, pointing out that 'The church invited the faithful to look for other palms, without taking into account that the wax palm is not the only species threatened by tradition. It retreated in its initiative to accept white handkerchiefs and festoons as an alternative for the celebration of Palm Sunday.'⁵²

After this retraction about the use of non-vegetal elements, campaigns aimed at discouraging the use of wax palm fronds in the Palm Sunday celebration took on a unique tone in the history of conservation. In the press and in conservation campaigns emanating from regional entities, a very particular mixture of ideas related to Holy Week with the idea of conservation could be observed. Headlines like 'Palm Sunday, Tradition, and Conservation', 'God Save the Palm', or 'The Palm of Sacrifice' became common before Holy Week (see Figure 6, left). Additionally, this hybrid language between conservation and religion became more complex when the underlying ecological impact of its exploitation was added, focusing on the other species with which the palm has symbiotic relationships. The clearest example of this concerns the impact on populations of the yellow-eared parrot (*Ognorhynchus icterotis*), a species which depends on palms for survival (see Figure 6, right). By adding an easy-to-recognise animal like the yellow-eared parrot to the conservation discourse, the national tree gained an ally. The image of the yellow-eared parrot was systematically exploited in the iconography related to wax palm conservation produced by governmental environmental entities known as Regional Autonomous Corporations.

51 Expenses for each parish were double what were incurred at other times of the year. For example, in 2012's prices, a single church could spend 16,000 dollars (at that year's exchange rate) on painting alone – see J. Obando, 'Lo Que Vale Una Semana Santa' [The cost of the Holy Week], *El Mundo*, 12 April 2012.

52 Chaves, '¿Ambientalismo o Tradición?', pp. 6–7.



FIGURE 6.

Left: Press advertisement published before Palm Sunday in 2001.

Source: Periódico *La Hoja*, Medellín; Right: Wax palm conservation campaign. Source: Proaves.

One of the achievements of the secularisation of the wax palm was the search for vegetal alternatives, among which the iraca palm (*Carludovica palmata*) stands out. This plant is a species of herb in the Cyclanthaceae family that, despite not being a palm in the botanical sense, has leaves that resemble those of the Araceae family. An article published in 2007 exemplifies this process of transformation in the religious market. Pedro Cardona, an employee of the Coca-Cola plant in Medellín who usually helped his father market palm bouquets, had collected around two thousand iraca palm bouquets that year. According to Cardona, after its extraction, the iraca ‘grows back faster than the wax palm’.⁵³ Since, for most citizens, it was difficult to distinguish between the iraca leaves and the wax palm frond, environmental authorities undertook campaigns

53 ‘Redacción, Los Caminantes del Domingo de Ramos’ [The Palm Sunday Walkers], *El Colombiano*, 2 April 2007, 3a.



FIGURE 7.

Posters designed to teach the differences between wax palm fronds and iraca leaves
 Source: Área Metropolitana de Medellín.

to combat this botanical illiteracy. In doing so, they aimed to educate potentially informed parishioners to buy the correct bouquet for the religious celebrations of Holy Week (Figure 7).

Despite different strategies in the conservation of the wax palm and its progressive replacement by other plant species, the extraction of wax palm fronds, although marginal, has persisted over time. Consequently, the stubborn use of these species in the crafting of bouquets has led to desacralisation campaigns with punitive practices, in which environmental police conduct operations aimed at prosecuting merchants who persist in obtaining resources by exploiting the national tree. Thus, even today, a few days before Palm Sunday celebrations, strange images of police officers presenting cargoes of unblest palm bouquets as evidence of their botanical confiscation often appear in the media.⁵⁴

54 See, for example, A. Pabón, 'Domingo de Ramos, Incautados 113 Kilos de Palma de Cera' [Palm Sunday, 113 Kilos of Wax Palm Seized], *Revista Contraluz*, 25 (2015): <http://contraluzcucuta.co/domingo-de-ramos-incautados-113-kilos-de-palma-de-cera/> (accessed 22 Aug. 2022).

CONCLUSION

The twentieth-century declaration of the wax palm (*Ceroxylon quindiuensis*) as the national tree of Colombia demonstrates how the production of national symbols is an ongoing process. Unlike early national symbols such as the flag, coat of arms and national anthem, the recognition of the wax palm as a national emblem was significantly informed by ecological awareness that emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century. Therefore, the declaration of the wax palm as the national tree of Colombia was the result of a unique intertwining of national identity symbols, religious practices and scientific-led ecological narratives. This triple significance of the wax palm – as religious fetish, national symbol and conservation object – has fostered unprecedented synergistic interactions among diverse social actors who collaborated to culturally re-signify this species, primarily aiming to discourage the use of wax palm fronds during Holy Week celebrations. Among these social actors, the mass media played a crucial role by amplifying the extinction risks highlighted by botanists. These campaigns embraced the ecological narrative, emphasising the ecosystemic value of the national tree, including its importance for species such as the yellow-eared parrot. This unique interaction between human and non-human actors around a single species has effectively reduced the pressure on populations of the national tree. The authors of the 2015 *Plan for the Conservation, Management and Sustainable Use of the Wax Palm* state that, with the exception of certain localities in the northeast of the country, ‘the ancient practice of harvesting the buds for use as blessed branches during Holy Week has now been almost completely eradicated’.⁵⁵ This confirms how the declaration of the wax palm as the national tree contributed to the symbolic transformation of this botanical rarity, in turn giving it a new place within a widely held botanical imaginary in Colombia.

The resignification of the wax palm as Colombia’s national tree also reflects continuities established in the creation of nineteenth-century national symbols, revealing representational gaps, such as the exclusion

55 Gloria Galeano, Rodrigo Bernal and María Sanín, *Plan de Conservación, Manejo y Uso Sostenible de La Palma de Cera Del Quindío (Ceroxylon quindiuense), Árbol Nacional de Colombia*, [Plan for the Conservation, Management and Sustainable Use of the Wax Palm of Quindío, National tree of Colombia] 1st ed. (Bogotá: Ministerio de Ambiente y Desarrollo Sostenible, 2015).

of subaltern voices historically ignored in the construction of the nation-state. For instance, similar to the Andean condor in the coat of arms, the wax palm is an Andean species, underscoring the persistent Andean-centrism upon which the national project was built, inspired by European ideas that viewed tropical lowlands as inhospitable to ‘civilisation’.⁵⁶ Consequently, the symbolic inventory of the natural/national lacks representation from other regions. We do not know how other plant species have been integrated, or not, into the representation of Colombia and its cultural rituals beyond the Andean mountains. Furthermore, the selection of the wax palm as Colombia’s ‘vegetal diplomat’, the same species chosen by Humboldt and Bonpland as the icon of their travels through the American tropics, underscores the enduring legacy of the European worldview in shaping the perception of nature in tropical countries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the two reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions, as well as Felix Driver and Fiona Kinniburgh for their helpful feedback on the English version of this paper.

Diego Molina is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at Royal Holloway, University of London. After working as a botanist in Colombia for several years, he turned to environmental humanities. In his research, he proposes a dialogue between images, texts and botanical collections to reconstruct historical relationships between people and plants in tropical cities. In his current research, he explores the nineteenth century transatlantic exchange of ornamental plants used in the creation of gardens in the Andes and in Europe. Before becoming a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, Diego was a Landhaus Fellow at the Rachel Carson Centre of Environment and Society in Munich.

Email: Diego.Molina@rhul.ac.uk

56 F. Martínez-Pinzón, *Una Cultura de Invernadero: Trópico y Civilización En Colombia (1808–1928)* [A Greenhouse Culture. Tropics and Civilisation in Colombia (1808–1928)], *Juego de Dados: Latinoamérica y Su Cultura En El XIX 6* (Madrid: Frankfurt am Main: Iberoamericana; Vervuert, 2016).