

HISTORICAL NOTE

NOTES ON THE DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED  
BY SPRUCE IN HIS COLLECTING

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Although the work of the outstanding British plant collector of the Amazon and Andes, Richard Spruce, is well documented in Wallace's 2-volume *Notes of a Botanist on the Amazon and Andes* (Spruce, 1908), edited primarily on the basis of letters and notes of the great plant explorer after his death, there is still unpublished material in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and the Linnean Society of London. This material leaves little doubt that Spruce was a tireless worker, that he probably preferred to work alone and that, although his dedication to floristic and taxonomic research left him little free time, he was interested in ethnobotany and in the knowledge that Indians had of their flora and in their ways of life.

From a letter to Mr. Bentham sent from Manáos, dated April 1, 1851, it is possible to see one of these characteristics of the man and his methods of work:

"My dear Sir—

I write to request you to pay to Mr. King (who is leaving me) the sum of £30 and to place the same to my account. I have given him an order upon which you will probably receive nearly at the same time as this.—Men are not very easy to obtain here, but I can do nearly as much alone as we two have mostly done, until I meet with some one to suit me. The person who is now leaving me has been a continual drag on my movements, and for some time past, when any excursion has been likely to entail difficulty or danger, I have gone alone rather than be troubled by him."

Spruce's difficulties resulting from Indian celebrations, dances and festivals, and cataraacts to pass without adequate help were frequent and serious and often entered into his field notes and letters. I can sympathize with Spruce: both of us, dedicated to use

every precious moment in botanical research and collection, found it difficult to adjust to this so different aspect of Indian life-style.

The falls of São Gabriel at the junction of the Río Negro and Río Vaupés were the subject of these two notes, the first dated December 28, 1851, the second April 15, 1852.

“Thus, far, have I advanced into the bowels of the land without impediment, and before adventuring the falls (where I may possibly get a ducking) I seize an opportunity of sending you the seeds of a beautiful Lythraceous tree which I collected on the way up. . . . “The Río Negro might be called the Dead River.—I never saw such a deserted region—in S. Isabel & Castanheira there was not a soul as I came up, and three towns marked on the most modern map I have, have altogether disappeared from the face of the earth.”

São Gabriel, Río Negro. April 15, 1852.

“. . . It is not pleasant to work here to be always among cataracts in my excursions. . . . I was out 4 days but 2 of them were lost time. I made my station at the house of the pilot of the falls, at the foot of the latter, and arrived just in time before the commencement of one of their great ‘festas.’ Much against my will I was compelled also to see the end of it, for no one wd stir until after two days of drinking and 2 nights of dancing. I was interested to hear the legend of the discovery of the mandiocca-root sung in the Barré language, and this was poor consolation for such a loss of time, and you may imagine how I fretted in my imprisonment on a small rocky island begirt with foaming waters, where I could not find a single flower that I had not already gathered.”

As if his problems on the rivers of the northwest Amazon were not enough, he encountered further difficulties in his botanically rich trip up the eastern slopes of Ecuador and Peru to arrive finally in Quito. In a letter written from Baños, at the headwaters of the Río Pastaza (presumably to Mr. Hooker) and dated July 4, 1857, Spruce wrote the following brief account of his problems:

“Dear Sir—I have at length the pleasure of writing to you from the Quitenian Andes—the goal so long placed before my eyes at an apparently interminable distance. I reached Baños 2 days ago after a most wearisome and perilous journey of 3 months, the worst part of which has been the last 18 days, occupied in traversing the Montaña from Canelos, at the head of the Bombanasa—the same forest that gave such trouble to Gonzalo Pizarro and Orrellano 300 years ago—as wild as it was then, and containing fewer inhabitants, for there are but 6 huts of unconverted Indians (Jivaros) about midway of it.”

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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#### LITERATURE CITED

- SPRUCE, R. 1908. A. R. Wallace, Ed. Notes of a Botanist on the Amazon and Andes. Macmillan and Co., London. Reprinted edition: Johnson Reprint Corp., New York. 1970.

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