

Capoche-Rediscovery of a Forgotten Febrifuge (*Ocotea veraguensis* [Meisn.] Mez) from Belize, Central America, Including a New Floristic Record.

—In the process of compiling a book on the ethnobotany of Belize, we came across the mention of an unusual medicinal preparation from a tree used to treat fevers. The mention was in a book from the 19th century, *The Colony of British Honduras, Its Resources and Prospects; With Particular Reference to its Indigenous Plants and Economic Productions* (1883), written by D. Morris, Director of Public Gardens and Plantations in Jamaica in the late 1800s (1). It offers a most interesting historical perceptible on the ethnobotany of the region. Morris discussed his travels of over one thousand miles of rivers and trails of Belize, undertaking studies of the native flora and its uses, along with agricultural production. One of his tasks was to suggest potential crops for the Colony, and his book is filled with interesting information about natural history and the use of some of the plant resources by local people. He referred to a Mr. Henry Fowler, Colonial Secretary of British Honduras, who led an expedition that explored much uncharted territory in the Colony. Morris quoted Fowler's observation (1) on an interesting but enigmatic use of a plant:

"... this tree, called by the Indians Capoche, appears to be the natural cinchona of the country, for it is used for fevers and has a bitter taste. The tree is very scarce. The Indians make cups from the wood for the purpose of water being steeped in them, which is given to the children for fever and also as an anthelmintic."

Morris further reported that, as no fruits or flowers had been obtained of the capoche, it was impossible to identify it, but surmised that it was "... probably a member of the Lauraceae" (1).

In the course of our field studies in Belize (1987–present), we have not come across the mention of a febrifuge with this name, administered through preparation of a cup carved from its wood. At the same time, an examination of nearly 20 000 herbarium specimens failed to yield any clues as to this specific use and preparation or of the plant's identity. Presumably, warm or tepid water was poured into the cup,

allowed to steep until the bitterness of the wood was transfused into the water, and consumed by the feverish patient. This is not the first time we have heard of this way of administering a traditional remedy. In India the senior author visited an herbal pharmacy where "diabetes cups" were sold; in that case the carved cups were to be filled with warm water, allowed to sit, and given to patients suffering from diabetes. The cups were reusable, and the drink was meant to be prepared in this fashion on a regular basis.

We were very curious about the identity of "capoche." While a number of species were recorded from our fieldwork in Belize as being useful for treating fevers, we did not record this particular name as part of our studies. Some of the voucher collections of plants discussed in the Morris volume are to be found today in the economic botany holdings of the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, at the Centre for Economic Botany (CEB). One of us (S.C.) visited Kew in January 2000, to make an inventory of the Belizean artifacts cataloged at the CEB, in order to illustrate some of the historical plant products in a forthcoming book on the ethnobotany of Belize. While there, she came across accession number 45307, comprised of bark and leaves of the "capoche" tree. In the entry book, dated February 13, 1882, it was noted that, "... the tree appears to be very scarce and much appreciated by the Indians; the bark is used in fevers and from the wood cups are made in which water is put and afterwards drunk by children as a remedy." The collections were photographed by the RBG Kew staff, and are reproduced as Fig. 1A and 1B. Still, we were at a loss to determine the taxon, due to the lack of adequate material.

With a renewed interest in Lauraceae material from Belize, we discovered an unmounted specimen at NY, which had remained unidentified for several years (Romero and Mesh *s.n.*, Fig. 2). The collection was made by one of us (L.R.) several years earlier and upon further investigation was determined to be *Ocotea veraguensis* (Meisn.) Mez of the Lauraceae. In addition, it was discovered to be a new record for the flora of Belize (2). Now one of eight species of the genus in Belize, the tree is known only from this one collection, gathered along a stream in the

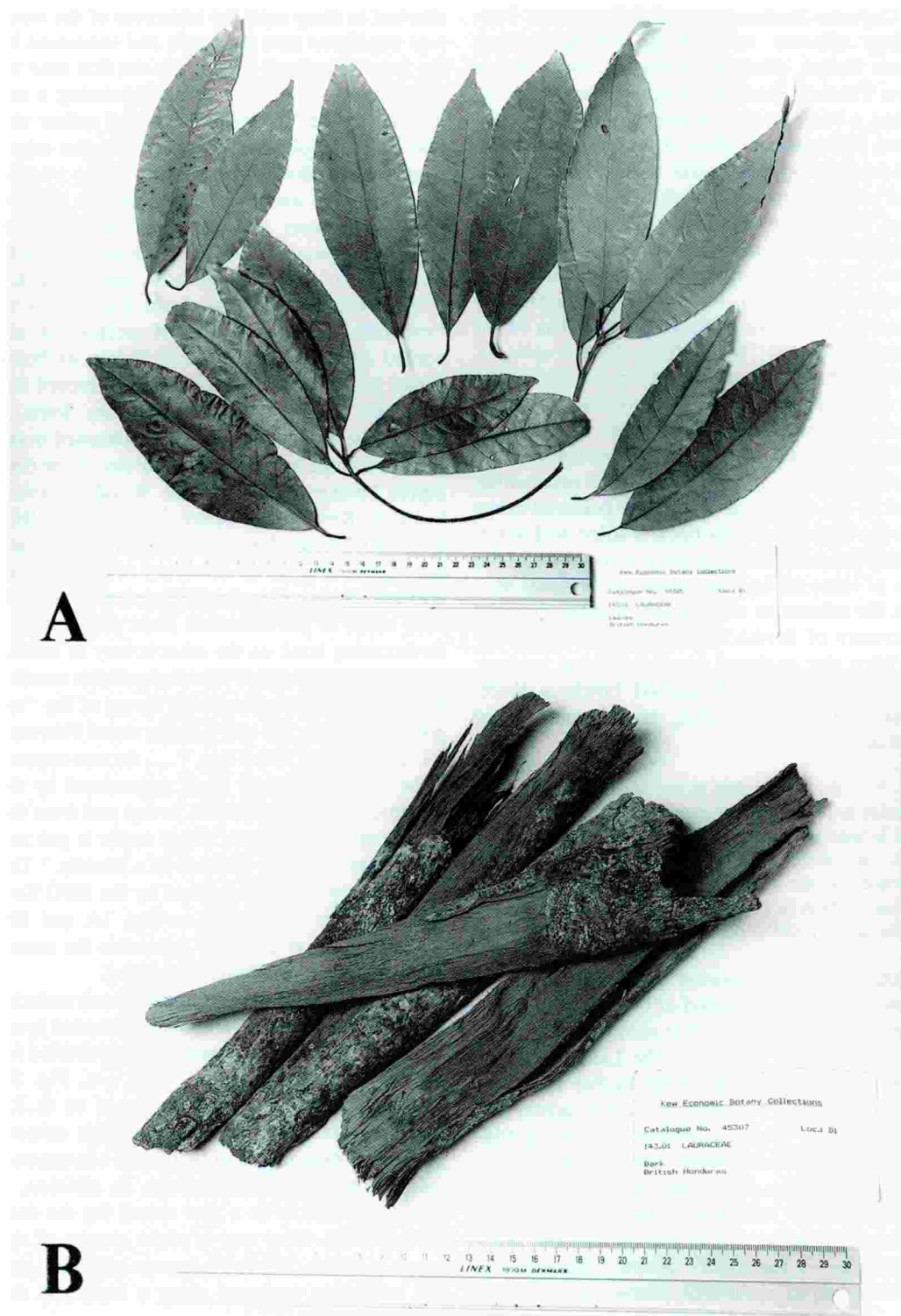


Fig. 1. A. Leaf material in Centre for Economic Botany collection, accession number 45315; B. Bark material in CEB collection, accession number 45307.

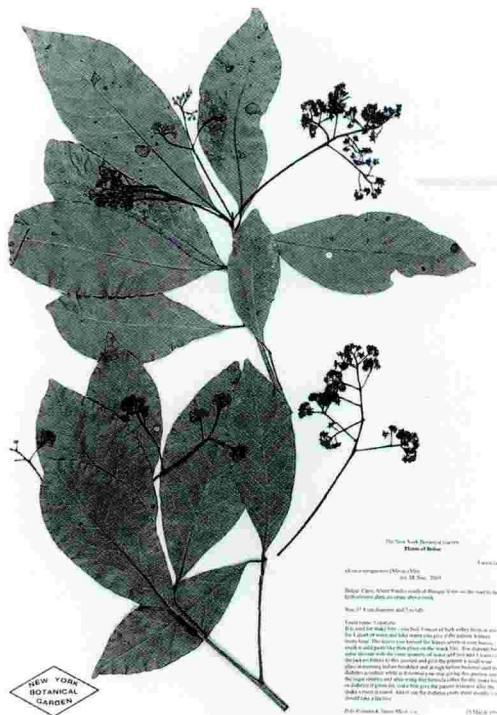


Fig. 2. Contemporary collection of *Ocotea vera-guensis* (Meisn.) Mez (Lauraceae), Romero and Mesh *s.n.*, collected in the Cayo District of Belize; known to the collectors as “copal che,” the bark is used to treat snakebite and diabetes. This species is a new record for the flora of Belize.

Cayo District between 300 to 500 meters elevation.

The tree is known to Romero as “copal che.” The bark and leaves are used to treat snakebite and diabetes. This ethnobotanical information was passed down to Romero over the course of a lifetime studying and practicing “bush medicine” in the Cayo District. The core of this knowledge is the result of an apprenticeship as a young man to a then well-known, elder traditional healer. The elder man was employed to care for chicle and mahogany workers and their families who spent weeks at a time in the forest, often several days walk from the nearest village. Like the master, Romero is of Mayan descent and is conversant in that language as well as English, Spanish and Creole.

Upon comparison, there is little doubt that the material collected by Fowler and the material collected by Romero and Mesh are conspecific. We conclude that the tree known in Belize as “capoche” over one hundred years ago is the

same tree now known to very few Belizeans (perhaps only one) as “copal che.”

In this brief note we propose a solution to an ethnobotanical mystery first posed in 1882 when Mr. Fowler delivered a package of bark and leaves to Kew that he collected in British Honduras, now Belize.

In this case, studies of literature, museum and herbarium collections, combined with fieldwork have resurrected ethnopharmacological data from extinction, at a time when both biological and cultural diversity are being lost in an important region of the world.

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Literature Cited. (1) Morris, D. 1883. The colony of British Honduras, its resources and prospects. Edward Stanford, Charing Cross, England. Page 88; (2) Balick, M. J., M. H. Nee, and D. E. Atha. 2000. Checklist of the vascular plants of Belize with common names and uses. *Memoirs of the New York Botanical Garden* 85:52.

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