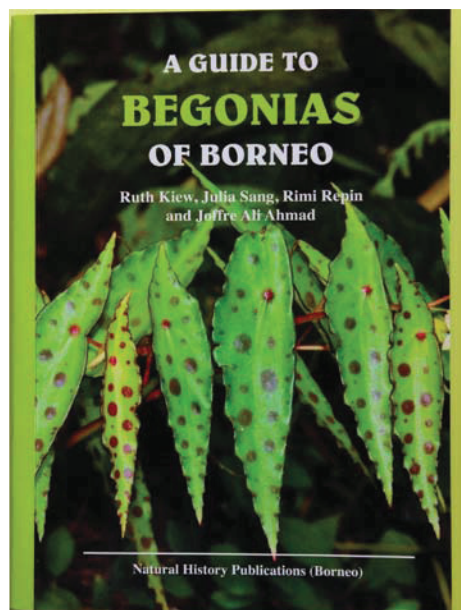


New Books

A Guide to Begonias of Borneo

Authors: Ruth Kiew, Julia Sang, Rimi Ripin and Joffre Ali Ahmad
Published by Natural History Publications (Borneo); (info@nhpborneo.com) 2015. 239 pp.
Price excluding postage: Softcover: RM 80.00 or US\$21.00; Hardcover: RM 140.00 or US\$37.00

Begonias are well-known as garden plants that come in an endless variety of colours, shapes, patterns and textures. The first begonia to be described from Borneo was *Begonia microptera*, in 1856. Now Borneo is known to be the home of at least 200 species of begonias and more are being discovered every year. One newly discovered species, *Begonia darthvaderiana* is now the most expensive *Begonia* in the market, if you can find it.



It has been a long-standing tradition for plants to be named in honour of botanists, plant-lovers or patrons of botany. The name *Begonia* itself was created to honour Michel Begon, the French Governor of Santo Domingo in the West Indies from 1682 – 1685. Michel Begon is now linked to Darth Vader who is not known to have had any interest in botany.

In Borneo, begonias grow in the deeply shaded forest understorey, from the lowlands to the mountain tops and on all rock types including granite, limestone, sandstone and ultramafic rocks. It is impossible to go into the forest anywhere in Borneo without seeing begonias, which are readily recognized by their very unequal-sided leaves. Until now there has been no illustrated guide to the species. Of the approximately 200 known species, 134 are illustrated here in nearly 600 superb photographs.

Although collectively common in Borneo as a genus, most species are restricted in distribution to small geographical pockets. All the Bornean species are endemic to Borneo, i.e. not found in nature anywhere outside Borneo. Hence most species are heading for extinction although one species is common enough to be harvested and sold in rural markets as a vegetable.

Some people are outraged that the extremely rare *Begonia darthvaderiana* has been stolen from

Sarawak and commercialised elsewhere. Those who really care about the future of species and their continued survival know that many species are doomed unless they are multiplied and looked-after in cultivation. Cultivation keeps alive the hope that such plants will be available for reintroduction to nature at the right time and place. Unfortunately, to be honest, that time and place is not here and now. Even things that can run and hide, like the rhinoceros, are finished; what hope for things that just sit still and look pretty?



Natural History Publications (Borneo) is famous for its beautifully illustrated plant books and this latest addition is one of the most attractive. It is amazing how cheap and good colour printing has become. Unfortunately while the price of

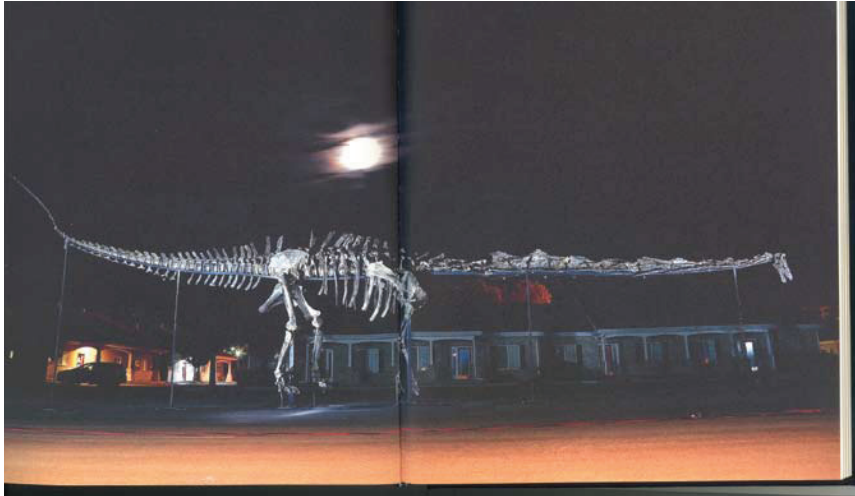
well-illustrated books has come down, postage rates in Malaysia have gone through the roof. For example, this journal (UASJ) costs RM1 to mail to anywhere within Malaysia but RM8.40 to mail to Singapore and other ASEAN countries.

Of Whales and Dinosaurs— The Story of Singapore's Natural History Museum

Author: Kevin Y.L. Tan
Published by the National University of Singapore Press. 2015. 265 pp. Many pictures, mostly vintage. Website: <http://www.nus.edu.sg/nuspress>

Natural history is the study of the diversity of life on earth. How many millions of different species are there? How did they originate? How do they live, compete and reproduce their kind? How are they related to each other and to humans? To study the diversity of life, specimens are collected for detailed examination and such

specimens are preserved in natural history museums where they also serve as records of what plants and animals used to be found, when and where. The specimens are studied again and again as new methodologies are developed and new questions arise. For example, it has become possible to extract DNA from long



dead specimens to obtain information that was previously thought impossible to obtain. In many cases it has been found impossible to go back to the same habitats for new specimens, for the habitats themselves are gone. For this reason, the specimens are irreplaceable.

Singapore's new Natural History Museum is set to become a major tourist attraction in Singapore, with its focus on the diversity of life in tropical Asia. The museum itself has had a very turbulent history and its name has changed many times. It began in 1823 with the inception of the Singapore Institution by Stamford Raffles, the founder of modern Singapore, to serve as an educational institution and to house a great library and museum. The collections were built up by the efforts of many generations of natural history scientists, as well as by donations from private collectors. Valuable specimens were also gifted by the Johore royal family.

The Japanese invasion in 1942 caused great anxiety for the curators of the Raffles Museum as well as the Singapore Botanic Gardens. By then the Museum and the Botanic Gardens had become world-famous centres for tropical research, holding collections of outstanding scientific importance. When the British vacated Kuala Lumpur to regroup in Singapore in the face of the advancing Japanese forces, the Forest Research Institute in the vicinity of Kuala Lumpur was looted. The scientific collections and records, of no value to the looters, were scattered and damaged by water gushing from the pipes that could not be turned off because all the metal fittings had been stripped off. There was reason to fear a similar fate for the Raffles Museum and Botanic Gardens Singapore. However, E.J.H. Corner of the Singapore Botanic Gardens took matters into his own hands, going straight to the victorious Japanese military high command with an appeal for protection for the scientific

collection. The Japanese responded favourably and the Raffles Museum and Singapore Botanic Gardens, with most of their British and local staff, came through the war almost unscathed. Corner had to bear the stigma of being a 'collaborator' for the rest of his life.

The worst was to come, not from any wartime enemy, but because the leaders of newly independent Singapore saw no political need or economic justification for a natural history museum. In 1960 the Raffles Museum was renamed the National Museum and directed to concentrate on culture, anthropology and the arts. The massive zoological collections were crated up and for almost 30 years, the crates were moved from place to place as nobody had space for them. The iconic whale skeleton of the old Raffles Museum was given to Malaysia and it looked as if the rest of the collection would be lost. It was left to a handful of dedicated people to keep a watchful eye over the crates and to keep alive the hope that the museum would somehow be resurrected. Then in 1987, the collection was given a home by the National University of Singapore at Kent Ridge. In 1998 the collection became the Raffles Museum for Biodiversity Research and Peter Ng was appointed its Director.

In late 2005 Peter Ng and several staff of the Museum were sent to the US on a sponsored study tour of museums, to see how American museums were run. According to Ng, "Initially, I was rather irritated because I always imagined that it should have been a simple case of the Government providing the funds and us putting up a good museum." This was the British and

European model. In America, museums are mostly funded by the public in the form of endowments and can be managed with consistent long-term scientific and educational objectives. At the end of the tour Ng was convinced that the American model was what was needed in Singapore. He also concluded that successful natural history museums have three things in common: (a) good corporate governance (b) a good endowment plan and (c) dinosaurs.

By 2009, as Singapore became rich and confident, people who remembered the Raffles Museum of their schooldays began to ask for the museum to be restored. The tide of public opinion was shifting and what was expected was not just a restoration but a massive upgrade. But where would the money come from? At this stage a group of anonymous donors offered \$10 million. However it would cost \$25 - \$30 million to put up a respectable building, assuming that the land would be free. The President of the University agreed to provide the land if the money for the building could be raised within 6 months. It was a really tough struggle to raise the next one million. Then the Lee Foundation stepped in and offered \$25 million. The museum was rebranded as the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum after its main benefactor. The building was begun in 2013 and completed in early 2015.

But it lacked a dinosaur! The last part of the book describes how the museum managed to secure not one, but three magnificent dinosaurs. The whale remains in Malaysia, in a museum in Labuan, but who knows? It may one day be gifted back to Singapore.