Citation


URL

https://oro.open.ac.uk/29400/

License

None Specified

Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University’s repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from Open Research Online (ORO) Policies

Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding
The history of the Bushman Candles goes back to the dawn of botanical exploration in southern Africa. The first published image of these plants dates from Johannes Bruyn’s 1738, but that, confusingly, appears to show two different species in the single engraving! Somewhat later, William Paterson (1789) and Charles L’Héritier de Brutelle (1792) both published engravings representing distinct species still currently recognised today. These wonderful early works of botanical art are reproduced in this new publication, demonstrating a fundamental theme: that the study of plants and their visualisation are complementary, symbiotic activities, each being intimately dependent on the other.

Much later, the renowned South African botanist and explorer Rudolf Marloth wrote on Sarcoceaulon in his magnificently extravagant work The Flora of South Africa (Vol. 2, 1925):

“In its flowers this is nearly allied to Geranium, hence it was formerly included in that genus, e.g. by Burchell, but the plants have a very different habit. The stems are slender and to some extent succulent, but covered with a thick cortex of special structure. This consists of numerous layers of compressed cork-cells, which are impregnated with resin and wax, thus forming an impermeable cylinder around the living tissues of stem and branches. Every year a new set of cork-cells is added to this mantle from within, which thus attains a considerable thickness in course of time. The quantity of resin and wax in it is so large that plants taken directly from the soil will burn like a torch, hence the name candle. S. burmanni (Monsonia species uncertain) (Karoo and Namaqualand) or bushman’s candle for S. rigidum (M. patersonii) (Great Namaqualand).

The existence of such an ample vegetation in an almost rainless country (in some years less than one inch of rain) … is a puzzle to the visitor arriving there for the first time. The sandy soil, and the violent sand storms which often rage for weeks without interruption would appear to be all that is necessary for the survival of a plant. But although these remarkable plants have no root system, they are still able to flourish, and there seems to be no trace of moisture in the soil. It is this ruggedness that intrigues and appeals to all of us who are captivated by succulent plants. Marloth intimated that the taxonomy of these plants has not been uncontroversial. He knew them as Sarcoceaulon, but prior to that some of them had been classed as geraniums and monsonias, and it is back in the genus Monsonia where they currently sit. This taxonomic shift is unfortunate because this distinctive small group of plants no longer has an exclusive home, since they have as bedfellows small, non-succulent herbs. However, the term Bushman Candles uniquely identifies the species that feature in this book, so this is a useful handle.

These Bushman Candles have staunch devotees in Charles Craig and John Larrainos, who have been observing these plants in their habitats for over 30 years. It is the plants as they occur in the wild that is the focus of this book, so this is not a traditional taxonomic work. The Bushman Candles follow on from Charles’s earlier books Geophytic Pelargoniums (Umduas Press, 2001) and Grass Aboes in the South African Veld (Umduas Press, 2005) where the main themes were ecological, unusual for works on succulent plants. Hence Charles and John follow in the footsteps of Marloth in bringing the Bushman Candles to our attention in this, the first book ever to be devoted to these remarkably resilient plants.

My own involvement with these plants has been a small contribution in the publication of the new combination M. patersonii, and I am delighted that this commemorates one of the authors of this book, a well-deserved accolade indeed.

This book also follows a strong tradition in South African botanical art. Marloth’s book was beautifully illustrated with colour plates and the current book is also visually appealing. The exquisite and botanically accurate water colour paintings of Ellaphie Ward-Hilhorst were first published by Rodney Moffett in his paper The genus Sarcoceaulon, in the journal Bothalia in 1979. Most of these paintings, though, were reproduced in a reduced size, but are now published in full size where their artistic merit can be fully appreciated. These provide the detail of each distinct species of Bushman Candle, based on plants in cultivation. To complement these, the plants in nature are portrayed in newly commissioned paintings by the renowned artist Gerhard Marx, along with pencil drawings of their habitats by Bowen Boshier, that together bring the harsh, arid environments in which these plants reside vividly alive. Reflections of all of this work are provided by these artists, the photographer Conall Oosterbroek and the taxonomist Rodney Moffett. This book, then, is truly a collaborative venture amongst a wide group of enthusiasts bringing together a diverse collection of skills to produce a book that not only provides a fascinating insight into an intriguing group of plants, but also presents them in a range of beautifully evocative images.

Colin C. Walker
Lecturer in Biology
Department of Life Sciences
Open University
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA

England