

Book Review: J.B. Comber 2001. **Orchids of Sumatra.** x + 1026 pages. The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, U.K. ISBN 1 84246 027 7. Price: GBP 95.00, RM 450.00.

Until the publication of this book, the orchid flora of Sumatra had been badly neglected, particularly when you consider all the recent publications on the orchids of Java, Borneo, Peninsular Malaysia and Thailand. The main source of information has long been a checklist compiled by J.J. Smith and published in 1933. Any attempt to identify a Sumatran orchid usually started with a rather discouraging check in J.J. Smith's list, it continued with a lengthy search through a lot of old journals and the literature on the orchid flora of surrounding areas, and it all too often proved indecisive. It could be species X, but it could equally well be species Y. This changed when Jim Comber decided to combine the information present in the old literature with his excellent knowledge of west Malesian orchids and the new information (mainly photographs) that he had gathered during the years he lived on Sumatra. The first orchid flora of Sumatra is now a fact.

The book is written following the lines of a normal flora: there is a short introduction to the island of Sumatra, its people, its history and its vegetation. This is followed by a key to the orchid genera, and keys to all the orchid species. Each genus and species is shortly described; similarities and taxonomic problems are shortly discussed below each taxon. For a relatively small number of species, analytical drawings have been included, most of these copied from originals by Rudolf Schlechter. And then, of course, there are the numerous large colour photographs of magnificent quality, most of which show close-ups of the flowers. While many of the photographs show the plant growing *in situ*, a large number show plants that were growing elsewhere in SE Asia, so they may not represent the precise form found in Sumatra. We understand that much of the delay in publishing this long-awaited volume was due to Comber's insistence that the photographs appear throughout the book alongside the relevant text, rather than the much cheaper option of grouping them together and inserting them as a series of colour plates. This treatment has resulted in a book that has attained a much higher standard of presentation than most floras; not only is the book informative, but it is a pleasure to use.

Of course, this volume also has a number of shortcomings, most obviously those that result from the fact that there are still so many gaps in our knowledge of the orchid flora of Sumatra. For example, many species are known from the type material only, often collected long ago and in several cases unfortunately now lost. For Comber, it must have been

frustrating to deal with such species, and problematic attempting to give them their proper place in the enumeration. Another frustration must have been Comber's inability to collect fresh material; this has resulted in several undescribed species being illustrated by photographs, but lacking a formal name, description or herbarium specimen. It is a real shame that these species could not have been described properly. There are also some shortcomings of a more technical nature; it would have been useful if more analytical sketches had been included. J.J. Smith's drawings are available to only relatively few people. They could have been copied just like Schlechter's drawings, and they would have facilitated identification.

As will be clear from the above, and as stated by Comber himself, this book is a preliminary study. Much work remains to be done, and large areas still need to be explored properly. Comber adds modestly '... but at least it is a start'. It is definitely more than that. It is an excellent work of reference for everybody interested in the orchid flora of West Malesia.

Jaap J. Vermeulen and Peter O'Byrne
Singapore.