

## **Additional 18<sup>th</sup> century records of endemic Seychelles fauna**

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While going through 18<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts from Philibert Commerson in Paris to extract data for Mascarene animals, I also came across material from Seychelles - representing species not formally described for many decades after Commerson

received them and had them drawn. The drawings, by Commerson's artist Paul Jossigny, are held in the archives of the Bibliothèque de Muséum in Paris (Laissus 1974), as part of MS 282 (2). This is a series of portfolios with drawings of specimens from Bougainville's expedition around the world, and from Madagascar and Indian Ocean islands done after Commerson left the expedition. He was then based in Mauritius from 1768 until his death in March 1773 (Oliver 1909, Monnier *et al.* 1994).

Jossigny was a meticulous artist, and his drawings of vertebrates and large invertebrates are easily identifiable even (as often) when they are not annotated by Commerson. Amongst the drawings are accurate renderings of the giant tenebrionid beetle *Polposipus herculeanus*, the Seychelles chameleon *Calumna tigris*, and two depictions of Seychelles endemic snakes (*Boaedon geometricus* or *Lycognathophis seychellensis*) which I was not able to identify on the spot. Apart from being labelled as from the Seychelles, the reptile drawings are not annotated, and the beetle does not even have the locality noted. In addition to these endemic animals, there are two drawings of a white-tailed tropic-bird *Phaethon lepturus* labelled as from Seychelles, and a brown noddy *Anous stolidus* that the context suggests was also from the islands. Published explorers' accounts of the period (Gerlach 1995) reported the seabirds, and a snake on Praslin, but not the chameleon or the beetle. As I was on a different quest, and the museum's charge for reproducing these archives is substantial, I did not request copies - so this note is primarily to draw attention to the presence of Seychelles material in the Commerson archive. There may be further items (particularly invertebrates) that I missed, and there are also written descriptions by Commerson, mostly in Latin, which might contain items from Seychelles, though I did not notice any when looking for Mascarene material.

Commerson did not visit Seychelles himself (Ly-Tio-Fane 1978), so the specimens must have been collected for him by one of the several expeditions from Mauritius that visited the Seychelles during 1768-1771 (Lionnet 1972). The drawings are unlikely to be later than 1771 as Jossigny remained in Réunion after Commerson's visit there that year, returning to his job as the island's second engineer (Ly-Tio-Fane 1978). Commerson also acquired plant specimens from the Seychelles (62 species, Laissus 1974), including the first material of the Coco-de-mer *Lodoicea maldivica*, controversially written up by his other artist Pierre Sonnerat (1776), who disingenuously implied having visited the Seychelles himself (he only passed nearby offshore). The Coco-de-mer material was collected by botanically-minded astronomer 'Abbé' Alexis Rochon in 1769 (Lionnet 1972, Ly-Tio-Fane 1978, Monnier *et al.* 1993), who, as a scientist, and friend of Commerson and Pierre Poivre (civil governor of Mauritius), may also have brought back the other specimens. Commerson's material remained unpublished in the Paris archives, and the animals mentioned above were not formally described until much later when new material became available. The beetle was eventually described in 1848 (Gerlach *et al.* 1997), the snakes in 1837 (Nussbaum 1984) and the chameleon in 1820 (Bourgat & Domergue 1971).

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## NOTES

manuscripts in the Bibliothèque du Muséum, Paris, in October 2006.

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