

Good questions on dispersal of mangroves by observers in the 19th and early 20th century – have we already answered them ?

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In natural sciences, we all may have a tendency to overlook historical sources which sometimes had addressed research questions we unknowingly reformulate. Encountering historical observations is not always straightforward, as they may consist of concise notes or remarks in undigitized sources or be inaccessible because of language. English has not always been the only and not even the main vehicle of scientific data, far into the 20th century.

When considering mangrove research, one can expect that the colonial powers reaching areas with tropical coasts were amongst the first to put forward scientific questions regarding these ecosystems after initial observation (Koedam *et al.*, 2017). The colonial process with all its damaging impacts, indeed went hand in hand with observation and research from the earliest days. While much early research, exploration probably being a better qualification, clearly had a commercially competitive and exploitative objective, sometimes explicitly, in later phases scientific endeavour could become a genuine goal. This is well illustrated in mangrove-related observations. Initially their potential for the colonial enterprise was explored, subsequently this apparently subsided (probably because of lack of colonial usefulness as a commodity).

The Netherlands and Belgium had major colonial empires into much of the 20th century, in the case of the Netherlands for several centuries. These countries' scientists mostly published their work in Dutch and French. It can be expected that a little explored set of observations on mangroves had been published. Are these relevant for the 21st century researcher? Old sources can be crucial as baselines for present-day research, but this would apply mostly to cartographic or administrative archiving (Dahdouh *et al.*, 2005, 2008).

We considered a triple incentive for another perspective of searching and presenting older sources in mangrove research: (1) curiosity, (2) highlighting Dutch and Belgian sources and rendering them better known to an international audience, and most importantly (3) gauging whether we have made progress in answering questions already put forward more than a century ago. We here mainly address questions related to mangrove dispersal, a core topic in our research group (Van der Stocken *et al.*, 2019), and present valuable observations of historical Dutch and Belgian sources.

References

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