

## Karel Petrzelka's Report

According to the recent works of Professors Seidenfaden, Averyanov there are more than nine hundred species of orchids described from Indochina so far. Since there are vast areas still unexplored, there is a high possibility that the list of orchids of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia will be much longer. There were a few serious botanists visiting forests of mountain ranges dividing these three countries since the French left Indochina in early fifties. After the confirmed discovery of at least two new species' of large mammals in last four years, many new animals and plants including orchid species could be expected. Even localities thought to be well known and explored bring some orchid surprise each year. In 1993, Dr. Haager described 5 new taxa of Vietnamese orchids. Two years ago, Averyanov had found a yellow Ladies' slipper, *Paphiopaedilum helenae*. And, in 1997, *Phalaenopsis chibbae* from the Central Highlands of Vietnam was diagnosed, not to mention several other, described by Seidenfaden and others. The population of the famed *Paphiopedilum delenatii* was presumed extinct or destroyed and the plant wasn't confirmed from the wild since its found. Three or four years ago, thousand kilometres southwards from Tonkin, the original locality, this plant was found anew by local tribesmen and loggers in Bi Dup Massive in the Central Highlands. New locality with thousands of specimen was confirmed by collectors from Saigon.

As Nature lovers living in Vietnam since 1989 we have had seen the vanishing of forests and all walks of forest life. The forest cover is shrinking very rapidly. Today, less than one fourth of Vietnam is covered by forest, fifty years ago it was more than a half. The wars of Indochina are over, no defoliant any more, but hunger for hard currency, over-usage of chemical fertilisers and insecticides, slash and burn agriculture, mismanagement and improper administrative decisions on the land use are the most important enemies of life and the biodiversity of these days. Orchids are cut down with meranti, keruing and other kinds of hardwood trees. Logs are taken away to the port and branches full of epiphytes remain left to dry and die. Logging is not the only reason of orchid vanishing. Bi Dup, the new locality of *Paphiopedilum delenatii* in the South isn't threatened by logging alone, but it is over-collected by hilltribe people, who sell the plants to middlemen for illegal exportation to Europe via Taiwan. In Hanoi, hundreds of newly described *Paphiopaedilum helenae* are bought by "tourists" and smuggled to Germany. There is a belief of the curative powers of *Ludisia discolor* and *Anoectochilus*' species among Asians, therefore these plants are exported from Vietnam "en masse" to Taiwan, declared as "vegetables". Very few individuals, no authorities at all who care about this, forest orchids are considered by locals being ordinary as daisies are for Europeans.

We are foreigners and a father-and-son team only, so there is almost nothing we can do about it. Therefore we decided to make a record at least of what was growing in the forest. We started to make photos of orchids in flower, and, if possible, we took some plants home to our garden for further cultivation. Today, our living collection of local orchids represents roughly 250 taxons from the southern part of Vietnam and adjacent provinces of Cambodia. The collection of prints (with basic description of flowers, data on occurrence, flowering and variability) is much larger, as it is much easier to take pictures than to grow mountain orchids in the heat of Saigon. There are about 350 species of 84 genera in our gallery of close-ups, most of them identified to the species' level, in some plants we are certain about the genus only.

Among them there are some worth of mentioning, e.g. *Bulbophyllum simondii* which has been known by the holotype only. We had the opportunity to observe and photograph *Eparmatostigma dives*, known from the herbarium by a part of inflorescence and a leaf, and, *Pomatocalpa grandis*, only known by a herbarium specimen supported by colour sketch with short description. We have portraits of 36 Vietnamese endemites and founds of other 5 species' we presume as a new botanical records for Vietnam and /or a new record for Indochina.

The pace of the forest destruction in Vietnam is alarming. Illegal logging is rampant, new settlers burn their new fields and the authorities turn blind eye as the officials are involved, anyway. The Government declared about 60 areas as National parks, reserves or monuments, but there are no means to implement the desired and desperately needed protection. We don't buy such an excuse, it is a total lack of general environmental awareness of today's Vietnam. Hopefully, our plants will become a part of the collection of the Prague's Botanical Garden soon as a reminder and an example of the disappearing and shy beauty of the orchids of Indochina.

Hochiminh City, April 1998  
Alexander and Karel Petrzelka

By the way, in the last week of March 1998, a new decree of the Prime Minister now permits the exploitation of hardwood for exports of traditional handicrafts, sawn timber et cetera.