

NOTES ON THE FLORA OF GUNONG JERAI (KEDAH PEAK)

by

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On two occasions in 1963, the Institute for Medical Research sponsored expeditions which spent a total of about three weeks on Gunong Jerai in Kedah. The first trip was in March during a dry period, the second in September shortly after the beginning of wet weather following a prolonged dry spell of several months duration. Although botany was not the major purpose of either trip, it was possible for me to make observations and to do some collecting in spare moments, the results of which are embodied in this paper.

The 3,996 feet of forest-clad sandstone, quartzite and quartz veins that is Gunong Jerai rises abruptly from the padi fields of the western coastal plain of Malaya some 22 miles north and slightly east of Penang. Its summit is six miles from the sea, and nearly 20 miles from the nearest comparable mountain mass to the east. From the summit there is a spectacular view of Pulau Langkawi in the northwest and Penang in the southwest. Across the padi fields can be seen the mountains of eastern Kedah and those beyond Alor Star. In March the view was obscured by smoke from the burning padi stubble in the fields below. In September clouds and haze usually obscured the view, but sometimes the atmosphere would clear temporarily to reveal the flooded fields below.

The only evidences of early habitation on the mountain are the ancient remains on the summit discovered by Irby (1906) and studied by Evans (1922). These have never been accurately dated nor identified although they seem to be of Indian origin. There are rumours of extensive remains buried in the jungle somewhere along the base of the precipitous granite cliffs high on the north and east faces, but they have yet to be authenticated.

The first botanist on the peak in the latter part of the 19th century was probably Thomas Lobb, who made a small collection of plants, later sent to the Kew Herbarium. In 1893 Ridley visited and made a fairly extensive collection, a short account of which he published a few years later (Ridley, 1900). Then in 1915 Robinson and Kloss (1916) made a natural history survey of the peak, which included a large collection of plants primarily from above 2,800 feet.

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A detailed account of this collection was published the following year (Ridley, 1916). Haniff (1916) includes material from Kedah Peak in a short list of monocotyledons from north Kedah.

In the twenties Evans and Gordon, and Flippance collected plants from Gunong Jerai; and in 1940 Spare made collections (Burkill, 1927, Steenis and Kruseman, 1950). Most of the specimens were deposited in the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

As Ridley (1916) points out, the flora of Gunong Jerai resembles that of Mt. Ophir, which was at one time an island detached from the mainland. It seems reasonable to assume that Gunong Jerai also was once an island. Indeed, it has been so considered since ancient times. In the Kedah Annals allusion is made to the fact that Gunong Geriang, G. Jambul and G. Jerai were once islands (Linehan, 1948). Seashells or other evidence of marine origin must have been discovered on these mountains and the correct conclusion haphazardly drawn (Winstedt, 1920).

In the report of his excursion to Gunong Jerai in June of 1893, Ridley (1900) mentions that at one of the grassy patches the turf was ploughed up by rhinoceros, but the animals were not seen. Near the summit at about 3,800 feet, we discovered a large grassy area lightly wooded with xerophytic vegetation (*Tristania*, *Leptospermum*, *Vaccinium*, etc.) which was torn up in just the manner Ridley described. This was unmistakably done by tapirs, which is probably what Ridley meant rather than rhinoceros. One of the trappers in our party also came across tiger tracks, and at least one troop of lotong (*Presbytis obscurans*) was seen. The caretakers at the bungalow claim that there are pig-tailed macaques near the summit, but we never saw them. Some mischievous animal of the monkey family was obviously present, however, since our small animal traps near the summit were repeatedly robbed of their bait and scattered about. Additional notes on the animal life of Gunong Jerai were published in a recent issue of this journal (Domrow and Nadchatram, 1963).

One event of considerable interest was the finding of a live onychophoran (by Dr. Paul Basch) in litter on a granite ledge at about 3,700 feet elevation. Nearly 50 years ago Hannitsch found a similar creature (subsequently described as *Eoperipatus*) 1,000 feet lower down the mountain (Robinson and Kloss, 1916). In both cases only a single specimen was found although efforts were made to find others.

The plant collections were confined for the most part to the upper reaches of the mountain from about 2,800 feet to the summit, roughly the same area from which Robinson and Kloss (1916) made their