



The Aloe of Madagascar [Les Aloe de Madagascar] by Jean-Bernard Castillon and Jean-Philippe Castillon (2010) Self-published; ISBN 978-2-7466-1872-5, hardcover, pp 399. Price (directly from the authors) is roughly US\$130, including shipping.

Review by Root Gorelick, Department of Biology and School of Mathematics & Statistics, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1S 5B6 (e-mail: Root_Gorelick@carleton.ca)

Several decades ago, the primary sources for information were books and journals put out by large publishers. Today, we have the indie media, who put out a panoply of websites and self-published books. There are true gems to

found in this information explosion, with far more variation than we had ever seen before. *The Aloe of Madagascar [Les Aloe de Madagascar]* arises from this phenomenon, a lovely self-published labour of love from Jean-Bernard and Jean-Philippe Castillon. This is a nicely illustrated checklist from people who know the plants and know the habitats. Furthermore, large portions of this book were reviewed by luminaries, such as Brian Kemble, and the forward was written by the indefatigable Jean-Jacques Lavranos.

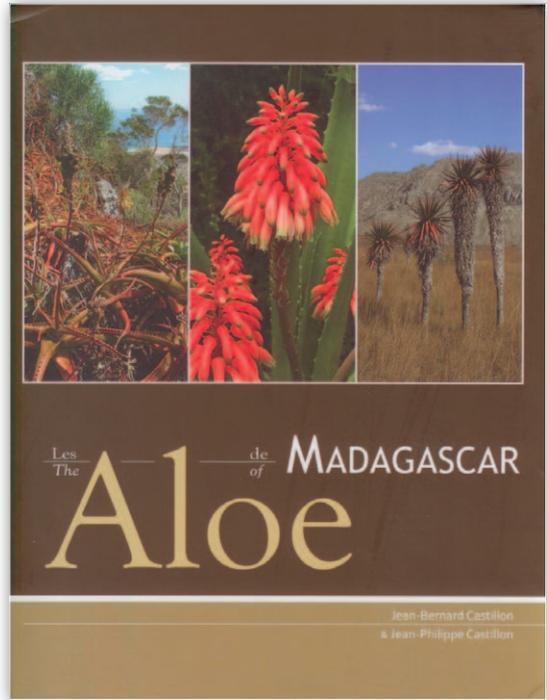
Following some introductory material, the Castillons break their book into eleven geographical regions of the red island plus a section on the outlying islands (e.g. Mauritius and the authors' native



La Réunion), describing and illustrating all *Aloe* and *Lomatophyllum* species and even some subspecies and hybrids. This sometimes means reproducing old illustrations when taxa are extinct. There is nothing phylogenetic about this book, which is probably fine until molecular genetic work gets done. As the authors assert, “This book is not a scientific revision of the genus in Madagascar, even if it lists all known species [and, antithetically, provides five new combinations]... It only presents as many pictures as possible of *Aloe* in their natural habitats and is made for the sole purpose of enabling collectors to put a name on a given plant.” Even the single diagram in which the authors speculate on relationships between taxa is a network, not a tree, although the reticulation is presumably not meant to reflect putative hybridization and introgression.

The highly fragmented geographic landscapes in Madagascar are depressing, largely reflecting recent anthropogenic damage, exacerbated by dire poverty. This is far different from Europe and North America where much of the damage was caused centuries ago and modern environmental damage is greenwashed. Nonetheless, the fragmented landscapes in Madagascar raise deep questions about conservation, as well as species and subspecies concepts. Should *ex situ* conservation be our primary conservation goal? What exactly is a geographic isolate (subspecies) when geography is fragmented by humans?

As Tom Waits (1976) astutely stated, “The large print giveth, and the small print taketh away,” which is certainly an issue with self-publishing. What masquerades as an index here, is merely an index of species names. There is no list of references nor literature cited. While the authors made an admirable attempt at making this book bilingual, having text on facing pages in both their native French and my native English, the translation is haphazard and sometimes rough. There are huge swaths of untranslated text. Reading this book as



an anglophone was reminiscent of the movie *Lost in Translation* (2003), in which a lengthy Japanese rant is translated into a virtually monosyllabic calm English utterance. In this *Aloe* book, you see a page filled in French accompanied by an overly efficient English translation that is one-fifth its length. Even the title translates poorly, as though there is only one *Aloe* in all of Madagascar. While the authors have illustrated all species, the colour printing lacks the crispness that many of their original photos have (at least the few originals that I have seen). Yet, regardless, many of the illustrations in this book are breath-taking. Editors and publishers really do create value added. On the other hand, editors and publishers may greatly delay publication and increase cost. At times I wish for both worlds: timely self-publishing, followed by rigorously edited and translated corporate publishing...much as economists do with their working papers followed by peer-reviewed journal articles. Given that this is the first book covering all known *Aloe* species of Madagascar since Reynold's *The Aloes of Tropical Africa and Madagascar* (1966) and the rapidly degrading environment of Madagascar, it is hard to argue with the rush to self-publish by the Castillons. And, even as someone who is not a collector, I immensely enjoyed this book. 🍷