

FOREWORD

In the rain forests of the Southeast Asian region and the Indonesian archipelago rattans occur in abundance—or at least, they used to. They also grow in the Western Ghats of India and in Sri Lanka and in the ever-wet areas of Equatorial Africa. Vicious climbing plants armed with fierce spines, they are responsible for the highly characteristic appearance of much of the remaining forests in these regions. Wherever they occur, they have been utilized to varying levels of intensity, supplying instant cordage, material for basket and mat weaving and bridge building, kitchen utensils, dyes, medicines, and thatch, all overshadowed by their great importance as a traded commodity, the raw material for the cane-furniture industry. Most commercially traded rattan is harvested from the wild by subsistence farmers living near the forest, who vary the activity of rattan pulling to fit in with slack periods of the agricultural cycle or when the need for cash arises. Over the past thirty years the dramatic decrease in forest cover, population increase, and major political changes have all had an effect on rattan gatherers and the wild resource. In the 1970s, forestry departments throughout the rattan-growing regions of the world perceived shortages of supply for the furniture trade and instigated new research aimed at safeguarding future supplies. This research was aimed largely at understanding the wild resource through taxonomic and ecological studies, developing techniques for cultivating rattan, improving processing and marketing, and improving manufacturing techniques. Rather little emphasis was placed by the forestry departments on a better understanding of the social importance of rattan.

Stephen Siebert's lifelong interest in the lives of rural communities that depend on rattan has produced a series of fascinating studies

undertaken in different areas of Southeast Asia, demonstrating the overriding importance of rattan to some of the poorest people of the humid tropics. In this book he brings together the many strands of rattan interest, from natural history to family planning in rural communities, weaving a compelling tale of the resilience of rural communities in the face of change. It is a privilege for me to write this foreword to a book that treats, uniquely, the interdependence of rural people, the forest, and the most important of the nontimber forest products, rattan.

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