**Overview of *Protium attenuatum* and l’ansan**

**By Adams Toussaint**

It is universally agreed that historically, frankincense trees were economically important plants. Most Westerners will recognize frankincense as one of the gifts of the three wise men at the birth of Jesus. What most people don’t recognize, however, is that the frankincense and myrrh were more valuable than the gift of gold (Tibetan Incense Blog 2009). More importantly, most people do not know is that frankincense is produced from trees belonging to Burseraceae family.

*Protium attenuatum*produces a resin that is both culturally and economically important (its Creole name, Bwa Lansan, comes from the French bois l’encens, incense wood). It is not known how many people depend on the income from harvesting and selling Lansan resin, but the collectors range from full time resin tappers (for whom the trees provide a primary source of income) to occasional, opportunistic resin tappers.

Most of Saint Lucia’s Lansan population is inside the government protected Forest Reserves, which cover 9,196 hectares. Access to the reserves is prohibited without permits, but the Forestry Department has too few rangers to patrol the entire reserve area and unregulated extraction of resin is occurring. The resin is extracted by slashing the bark, which can endanger the tree. Some trees have dozens of seemingly indiscriminate cuts and recent studies have found trees dying or showing severe crown die-back due to careless cutting. Without intervention, this exploitation could serious damage the population of Lansan in what may be its last stronghold.

The Saint Lucia Forestry Department is keen to promote the sustainable use of forest resources and Lansan is a good candidate for this. Under a sustainable management system, resin tappers could be licensed either as individuals or as a communal group to harvest trees using approved methods within agreed areas in the Forest Reserve. Trusted licensed tappers could potentially be authorised to patrol and even arrest non-licensed resin tappers in the forest, to help protect the trees in their care.

Before launching a new sustainable use system, however, there are some important information gaps to address. In particular, how to harvest resin without compromising the tree’s health. There is also a clear need to educate and engage with the resin tappers, traders, buyers and law enforcement officers, to ensure they cooperate and recognise the benefits of managing this resource more sustainably.

The Saint Lucia Forestry Department already has some experience with this type of work, having successfully worked with local people to introduce sustainable cultivation of Latanye palm *Coccothrinax barbadensis*, used in the manufacture of brooms. Fauna & Flora International (FFI) has experience with community-based management of resin trees in Southeast Asia and could assist the Saint Lucia Forestry Department with the design and implementation of this project.

In Saint Lucia, the l’ansan trade is a dependable source of income for the poor people in many communities in the vicinity of the forests in Saint Lucia. These rural populations are traditionally depended on local forest resources to provide additional income through collection and marketing of l’ansan for religious and domestic use. However, it is a diminishing resource due mainly to the unsustainable harvesting method used by the local people. Added to this, is the increased in the number of people who have turn to the illegal harvesting of incense in the forest reserves and the growing demand l’ansan in Martinique, Guadeloupe and the domestic market. It has been estimated that in St. Lucia, between 1992 and 1997, 49% of farmers left the banana industry (GOSL 1999). It appears that the majority of the l’ansan harvesters, once worked in the banana industry, would have turn to l’ansan trade as alternative sources of income to make up for the gap created due to the decline in the banana industry.

**Taxonomy**

Kingdom: Plantae

Division: Magnoliophyta

Class: Magnoliopsida

Order: Sapindales

Family: Burseraceae

Genus: Portium

Species: attenuatum

*Protium attenuatum* (Rose) Urban is known as encens, gommier, and bois encens, with l’ansan the preferred trade name (Howard 1988 and Longwood 1962).

**Physical Attributes**

* **Growth Habit(s):** tree or tree-like
* **Leaf Arrangement:** Alternate
* **Leaf Type:** Compound
* **Flower Colours:** yellow

*P*. *attenuatum* grows straight, nearly unbuttressed evergreen tree generally distributed throughout the rain forests on many different soils and sites. It reaches a maximum height of 24m to 27m and a diameter of about 60 cm or more on favorable sites in St. Lucia (GOSL 1992-2002)

**Geographic Distribution and Range**

*Protium attenuatum*is a Lesser Antillean endemic currently listed by IUCN as Data Deficient. The species has reportedly been depleted across most of its restricted range in the Lesser Antilles Windward Islands, now restricted to the southern part of the Lesser Antilles in Guadeloupe, Dominica, Martinique, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent. It is common in St. Lucia’s and are found at mid elevation transition forest and the rain forest areas. It is less frequent in Dominica and uncommon in St. Vincent and no report for the tree in Grenada. Recent surveys in Saint Lucia indicate this small country currently holds the largest remaining population.