1. Biological exploration of New Guinea

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1. Introduction

The biological exploration of New Guinea has a relatively long history but for long it was casual, often centered around “curiosa,” and for a number of reasons serious work did not begin until the mid-19th century, with penetration of the interior only after 1870.

Many of the early voyages of exploration up to 1840 touched mainland New Guinea or some offshore islands, but only some carried naturalists who took back specimens for study — notably those of Bougainville, Cook, d’Entrecasteaux, Duperrey, Dumont d’Urville and Belcher. Although many important collections were made on these voyages — notably by French naturalists — the first sizeable zoological collection was made by Wallace in 1858. The first major one in botany was in 1872 by Beccari with whom the zoologist-adventurer d’Albertis made the first real ascent into the interior, to only 1100 m, in the Arfak Mts. Beccari was to return to the Vogelkop in 1875, the same year that collecting in SE New Guinea, stimulated by the Challenger rivalries and Australian “manifest destiny,” began in earnest, leading finally to Forbes’ large effort in 1885–86. In the Bismarck Archipelago, 1875 was also the year of the visit of the German circumnavigation in the Gazelle as well as of Turner, a naturalist collecting for von Hügel, then working in the S Pacific. NE New Guinea opened up more slowly: although Miklucho-Maclay had resided on Astrolabe Bay in 1871–72 and 1876–77, and Finsch had collected along the coast in 1880–82 and 1884, serious work only began in 1886 with the first large official exploring expedition from Germany.

Aside from limited mountain ascents (notably by Hunstein behind Port Moresby), much of the early work was along coasts, main rivers and on offshore islands (e.g. Duke of York Is., Japen, Saibai, Waigeo). It was MacGregor — one of the few responsible administrators with a marked interest in natural history — and his officers who first greatly expanded knowledge of the mountainous interior. They made several major ascents, notably Victoria in the SE, 1889–98, although Cuthbertson and Sayer reached Mt Obree in 1887 — making a record. Not until the early 20th century was there serious mountain collecting elsewhere: the main cordillera in the west, where the Oranje and Nassau ranges were ascended by Lorentz’s (1907–13) and Wollaston’s

(1909–13) expeditions; also the Saruwaged Range on the Huon Peninsula by Keysser in 1912–13. Schlechter unsuccessfully attempted Mt Otto in 1908. Since then, activity has continued in many areas at a higher level, although in Irian Jaya rather less since 1962. By 1939 the major features were more or less known, but gap-filling still continues.

2. Early history

Though New Guinea was visited earlier by Malay (and Chinese) traders from Dobo and elsewhere, its earliest recorded explorers were Portuguese, in part in search of the great “southern land” then thought to be necessary to balance the large land masses of Eurasia and N America. Not until the 17th century — and this became generally known only much later — did this part of the “great land” prove to be an island. The first to come was Jorge de Meneses in 1527, but he had no idea of its extent. He was followed by Alvaro de Saavedra in 1528 and Ortes de Retes in 1545. The latter named the island New Guinea because the people looked like Africans. All of them landed on the NW coasts and offshore islands, some near Manus. Spanish entry only came later, and then from the Americas: in 1567 Alvaro de Mendana discovered the later—lost Solomon Is., eventually returning with Pedro Fernandez de Quiros, who in 1595 discovered the New Hebrides. In the next decade came the important expedition of Luis Vaiz de Torres who sailed along the south coast in 1606 and traversed the strait later named for him.

The first Dutch voyage to the East Indies was in 1597 and contacts by Dutchmen with New Guinea began in earnest early in the 17th century. Willem Jansz on the Duyfken in 1606 may have been the first, but more important was the voyage of Willem Schouten and Jacob Le Maire in 1616, viewing New Ireland, Manus and much of the north coast. Both voyages suffered massacres. In 1623 Jan Carstensz saw the SW coast and was the first to see, in disbelief, the ice-capped highest peaks of the mainland which for long have borne his name (now Gunung Jaya). Two decades later, in 1642, Abel Tasman touched New Ireland and (for the first time) the shores of New Britain, but thought both were continuous with New Guinea and Australia.

In 1700 was the epoch-making visit by the Englishman William Dampier. In his ancient ship Roebuck he visited the north coast and discovered Mussau and Amira north of New Ireland, sailed along the north coast of the latter and then past his “St George’s Bay” along the south coast of New Britain, discovering the strait between it and New Guinea. Dampier bestowed the name Nova Britannia by which it has since been known (except as Neu Pommern during German rule). Dampier, the ex-buccaneer and explorer, was also a natural historian, and brought back “curiosa” for study: the earliest scientific specimens from the region. The Dutch continued to make discoveries and contacts in the western areas (including from the Geelvink in 1707), and in 1714 New Guinea, with the S Moluccas, was ceded to the Dutch by the Sultan of Tidore.

However it was the English and French who were to set an entirely new trend, taking a cue from Dampier. From the 1750’s most voyages involved serious