Book review

VAN MELE, P. & CUC, N.T.T. 2007: Ants as friends: Improving your tree crops with weaver ants (2nd edition)

Africa Rice Centre (WARDI), Cotonou, Benin and CABI, Engham, UK, 72 pp. ISBN 92 9113 3116.

The book in either French or English can be ordered, free of costs, at the Africa Rice Center (WARDA) by contacting Ms. Jacinta Achuzia at j.achuzia@cgiar.org

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The value of weaver ants (*Oecophylla*) for limiting tree crops has been realised by southern Chinese farmers since times of antiquity. The idea was further developed in the 1960's and 70's by overseas-aid scientists working in East and West Africa, where *Oecophylla* and other beneficial species such as *Tetramorium aculeatum* became incorporated into recommendations for integrated pest management schemes. Uptake of these schemes by growers was less than spectacular, although Paul Van Mele, working in Vietnam, and Renkang Peng, working in Australia, have recently given new stimulus to the value of these ants in Asian and Australasian tree crops.

This book, co-authored by Paul Van Mele and Vietnamese colleague, Nguyen Thi Thu Cuc, aims to inform farmers, NGO workers and extension staff about the value of weaver ants (*Oecophylla longinoda* in Africa and *O. smaragdina* in Asia and Australia) for limiting pests of tree crops and provides a very prescriptive set of guidelines on how to use them in such programs.

This is not a text book. It is designed to be picked up, read and understood by the non-scientific reader. This is done by including attractive photographs, humorous cartoons, interviews with farmers and, importantly, by avoiding the use of scientific terminology. It is divided into four parts. The first, "Introduction to natural enemies", outlines the entire range of predator, parasitoid and pathogen organisms that might be valuable to growers, and culminates in a description of weaver ants and how they are beneficial. The second section, "How weaver ants live", goes through the biology of weaver ants and discusses their community structure. Section three gets down to the important issues of how these ants can be introduced into tree crops and how they can be managed; it is packed full of practical details. Finally, before providing a list of further reading, the last section ("How weaver ants improve our life") explains the economic and other benefits of adopting this type of pest management scheme. Importantly, it highlights the potential for growers to capitalise on the organic fruit market.

The use of beneficial ants has always had its sceptics. Fears that sap-draining hemipterans might be encouraged by these ants, and that farmers might be bitten or "stung" are frequently raised. The former is countered by the authors, while practical suggestions to avoid being bitten are provided.

The book succeeds in its aim of educating growers on the value of using beneficial ants. I'm not sure that I support the suggestion by the authors that this book should be of value to university students; it is too elementary for that and the avoidance of scientific jargon leads to the use of some rather unscientific terms. The book also discusses the problems of introducing weaver ants into the territories of ants that are already present in the plantations. The recommendations largely centre on how to deal with the Asian ant, *Dolichoderus thoracicus*. The situation in Africa, where carton-nesting *Crematogaster* may be present, is not dealt with. My only other concern is that the text, and particularly the reading list, totally neglects to acknowledge the extensive foundation work that was performed in the 1970's by people such as Dennis Leston and his team. Most of the topics outlined in this book were already known by that time.

This is an attractively presented book, which should reach the target audience, particularly if the Bahasa and Vietnamese translations that existed for the first edition, come to fruition.

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