



Sago Palms
and their
Worms
HOLGER HOFFMANN

Sago Palms and their Worms

HOLGER HOFFMANN

Our ten companions enter the clearing. Barefoot, the Korowai skillfully balanced over the felled tree trunks overgrown with plants. On the other hand, although well shod, I have to concentrate strongly on the path. Nevertheless, I notice that the usual welcoming yodel is missing this time, with which the visitor announces the peaceful intention of his coming. Usman, our guide, answers my question by saying that no one lives in this clearing. My searching look up into the tree houses seems to confirm this. Wait, didn't something move up there at a height of 15 meters behind the house wall? I share my observation. Now everybody looks up to the tree house, which I suspect is a human being. It doesn't take long until one of our porters also thinks he has seen a movement from another angle. Now they all start to shout and yodel loudly. They want to lure the inhabitant out of his hiding place. But the Korowai do not build 10 - 20 meter high tree houses for no reason. The only way to get to the platform is via a swinging tree trunk suspended from the top, into which notches have been cut for climbing up. The tree trunk can be pulled up at any time in case of danger. And dangers lurk everywhere: neighbors - usually living half a day's walk through the jungle away - can be deadly enemies.

So, we missed applying the welcome yodel at the edge of the clearing as a sign of our peaceful intentions. Now good advice is needed, because we can only spend the night here if the inhabitants allow it. The alternatives - spending the night in the jungle or walking to the next clearing - are not very tempting. For us, the path is already a challenge during the day, although we have practiced balancing on felled tree trunks at home.



Sago Palms and their **Worms**

HOLGER HOFFMANN



Only here in the swamp, they are slippery, overgrown by plants, and often serve as the only way to cross a stream into which one does not necessarily want to fall. However, we are richly rewarded for our efforts by the lush nature and by the anticipation of meeting the Korowai.

The majority of the 2900 Korowai recorded in the last census do not live in village-like settlements, but instead, each family clan builds a tree house in the middle of a clearing a few hours' walk from its neighbor. This is located close to the sago palms, which are vital to them. Once these are felled, the Korowai plant new ones, move on, and do not return until the palms are fully grown. This shifting cultivation has been practiced for thousands of years. The largest virgin forest on earth, which is difficult to access due to its marshlands, offers enough space for this practice.



Sago Palms and their **Worms**

HOLGER HOFFMANN

Holger Hoffmann @ All rights reserved.

The Korowai accompanying us do not give up in the clearing and call up to the tree house incessantly at a respectful distance. Incredibly fast, almost falling, a man dressed only with a leaf around his penis comes down the ladder and instantly disappears into the dense jungle without us having been able to make contact with him. And now? What does this mean? What should or can we do? All possibilities are discussed. We have no idea how to interpret what has happened, and no one can relieve our tension.

About 20 minutes pass, and the man reappears at the edge of the clearing. In his hands, he holds three pineapples. Incredibly, I could hug him. Right away, we take the pineapples from him and peel them. Everyone is happy and relaxed; I have never eaten such aromatic pineapples as here.

We have been traveling with our companions for five days in the swamps of the lowlands of West Papua from one Korowai clearing to the next. From Kepi, we have previously traveled for two days by boat to Basman. From there, the walk should take nine days. Our porters carry the food for the whole time because there is nothing to buy on the way. The Korowai feed mainly on sago and whatever else the rainforest has to offer in the way of animals, roots, and fruits.

We still have a few bananas. Sleep in the tent at the foot of the tree house comes only when the ears have become accustomed to the concert of the rainforest. I fall asleep, hoping there will be fried bananas for breakfast. When I wake up, the disappointment is high. I find no more bananas. I learn from Usman that our troop and current hosts have eaten all the food. The Papuans have completely different ideas of stockpiling than we do. Tomorrow it may be rotten, infested with animals like ants or worms, or 'borrowed'

from family members. They eat everything that is edible, and they eat it immediately. Now what? What are we going to feed on for the next few days? No problem; three of our companions have already left for Basman during the night and, if all goes well, will be back tomorrow with supplies. I am worried about how they will find their way in the darkness, when it is hardly recognizable even during the day and full of dangers, such as rotten tree trunks, and thorny bushes, not to mention the many nocturnal insects and other creatures.



Holger Hoffmann © All rights reserved.



Sago Palms and their Worms

HOLGER HOFFMANN



Sago Palms and their Worms

HOLGER HOFFMANN

Usman reassures us. The Korowai are used to finding their way even at night. In the meantime, the family living here in the tree house will try to catch fish and crabs using a fish trap made of woven palm leaves, in which an ants' nest is placed as bait. If that doesn't work, there is always the possibility of searching the stalk of the sago palm, which was cut down a few weeks ago, for sago worms. Well, that sounds promising.

The day before, the family took us to their weekly sago extraction. The man carries a stone axe, and the women themselves have woven nets hung around their heads. Inside are their utensils or babies. Fresh water is important in the extraction of sago, a type of flour made from the trunk of the

sago palm. As soon as they are on-site, they test which palm is ideal for harvesting by hitting the trunk. A mature sago palm is between seven and nine years old. The stone axe breaks apart several times and has to be fixed again. Meanwhile, those who can afford it use a metal axe. The palm tree falls in the intended direction. The first thing to be peeled out is the heart of the palm, a snow-white cylinder about 1.5 meters long. Immediately, the women put pieces of it into their mouths. As we eat from the offered pieces, first cautiously and then more and more enthusiastically, everyone is happy. Two of the palm heart barks are set up on site-constructed racks to form long sloping troughs.

Holger Hoffmann © All rights reserved.



Holger Hoffmann © All rights reserved.





Sago Palms and their Worms

HOLGER HOFFMANN

WEBSITE: WWW.CHAOSTOURS.CH

EMAIL: INFO@CHAOSTOURS.CH

INSTAGRAM: [@CHAOSTOURS.CH](https://www.instagram.com/CHAOSTOURS.CH)



Holger Hoffmann © All rights reserved.



Parasols made of large palm leaves provide some shade for hard-working women. They use their implements to chop the inside of the slashed middle part of the trunk into small pieces. These are collected and poured into troughs. The clean water bubbling nearby is added with large leaves formed into bowls. Now the woody snippets are pressed by hand, and the sago flour is flushed out. A sieve made of dried lichen is attached to the lower part, through which the water drains away and

retains the farina. Once several kilos have accumulated, the drained dumpling is wrapped in leaves and placed in a net.

Then holes are drilled in the trunk's lowest part with the ax's handle. They are an invitation for the weevil to lay its eggs here. After a few weeks, the much-loved larvae emerge from them. These sago worms are the Korowai's most important source of protein. After everything has been

processed, they all make their way back to the tree house. A fire is lit as soon as they arrive, and one of the giant dumplings is held in the heat like a raclette cheese. A crust is formed, which is loosened by bamboo tongs and eaten immediately. For dinner, there are neither crabs nor fish. The fish trap remained empty. Apparently, the ants were not attractive enough. Our cook does his best. He has garlic, ginger, and chili in his box and fries the crunchy, fat

black-headed sago worms. Usman gleefully stretches out one of the fat sago worms, which resemble a Pirelli man, towards me. Now everyone is looking at me. How should I behave? Quite simply: open your mouth and swallow. But it won't go down without chewing, so I bite it. The head is crispy, and the body is juicy and tastes like scampi.

Our survival at the Korowai is assured.

The next morning, when our three emissaries return from their trip to Basman with large food rations, I feel a certain disappointment: sago worms will remain a rarity for us. Only four years later, on our trekking to the Stone Korowai- do we enjoy sago worms again.