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BRIEF COMMUNICATION

Distribution of the seagrass *Halophila decipiens* Ostenfeld in the Indian Ocean

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SUMMARY

As a result of new collections, the distribution of the rare, pantropical seagrass *Halophila decipiens* Ostenfeld in the Indian Ocean has become much better known. In this paper the species is recorded for the first time on the coasts of Ethiopia, Tanzania and Burma. An updated map of its distribution in the Indian Ocean is presented.

Key-words: Halophila decipiens, Indian Ocean, seagrass.

Among the 55 species of seagrass known at present, *Halophila decipiens* Ostenfeld is the only species with a pantropical distribution. In seagrass taxonomy the Atlantic *H. baillonis* auct. non Aschers. and the Indo-Pacific *H. decipiens* were originally considered to be separate species. Later study showed that the distinguishing character, the degree of hairyness of the leaves, was very variable even within one population, and in some cases even on the same specimen, thus the two taxa had to be combined (Den Hartog 1970).

Although *H. decipiens* has been found in all three oceans its known distribution appears to be very patchy. This is obvious from the last published map (Den Hartog 1966) and the list of localities recorded in my seagrass monograph (Den Hartog 1970). In the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico the species is not uncommon. Recently, however, it has been recorded from various places along the coast of Brazil (Den Hartog 1972; De Oliveira *et al.* 1983) and from the Canary Islands (Gil-Rodriquez *et al.* 1982), so that the Atlantic distribution of the species appears much larger than originally thought.

In the Pacific the species is known from several places, often far apart, and although several new localities have become known since 1970, the general picture of its distribution has not changed.

In the Indian Ocean the known distribution has been changed profoundly, due to a large number of new records. In the seventies, however, the species was only known from the Seychelles and Cargado Carajos in the central part of the Ocean, from one locality in Sri Lanka, and two localities in the Bombay area, India (Den Hartog 1970). In one of the latter localities it has been recently rediscovered (Almeido & Lattoo 1986).

Since this time, the species has been recorded from the Chagos Archipelago (Drew 1980), Tuticorin in south-eastern India (Lakshmanan *et al.* 1988; Parthasarathy *et al.* 1988), Ras Ghârib on the Egyptian Red Sea coast (Jacobs & Dicks 1985), as well as from a number of localities along the north-western coast of Western Australia (Walker & Prince 1987). The following localities, not recorded before, can be added to this list.

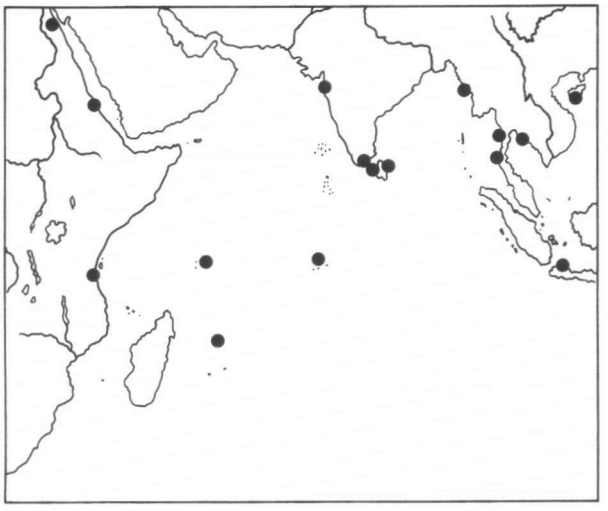

Fig. 1. Distribution of *Halophila decipiens* in the Indian Ocean.

ETHIOPIA. Erythrea, Dahlak Archipelago. Entedebir Islet, Goliath Bay. Israel South Red Sea Expedition E/62/20107, 22 March 1962. Leg. G.F. Papenfuss (UC).
TANZANIA. Bagamoyo, north of Dar es Salaam, north end of town. United States Program in Biology International Indian Ocean Expedition PR-IX-32, 14 October 1962, Leg. G.F. Papenfuss & R.F. Scagel (UC, UBC).
BURMA. Ramree Island, Taung Pyo, drift, 6 April 1974, U. Min-Thein MMB 1102 (Herb. University of Moulmein, L).
Tavoy, Maung Ma Cran, 14 May 1977, V. Kyi Win MMB 524 (Herb. University of Moulmein, L).
The present known distribution of *H. decipiens* in the Indian Ocean is shown in Fig. 1.

The increase in the number of new records can be ascribed to the increased intensity of marine research and to the improved methods of surveying the sea-bottom. In the past, exploration of the sea-bottom was largely carried out by dredging and one had to rely on material accidentally brought up by nets and anchors. Now, SCUBA diving and underwater television scanning allow efficient sampling of the sublittoral environment.

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