

HAMMOCKS

by Daniel F. Austin

Since before 1905 when Francis Harper published a paper on hammocks in *Science*, botanists have been discussing the concept and origin of the word. Usually the ecological concept of a hammock is straight-forward — an island of trees within some other vegetation type. This physical vegetation type is so common in the tropics that several other languages have terms for it.

Tracing the origin of our word hammock, however, has not been easy because it has two meanings and has been confused with a similar word. Most dictionaries say that it is properly spelled "hummock," and that it is of English origin. A state park at one time had a sign that said it was an "Indian" word and that it meant "a shady place." And so, about two decades ago, the argument went underground, rarely surfacing enough to let the average person know that there was even confusion.

When I came to Florida, over a decade ago, I started trying to ferret out the origin of the word because I wanted to know, and because I wish to give out correct information to my students. Little did I realize how complicated and fractionated were the opinions, theories, concepts, and actual documented histories. In case someone else may have been as confused as I was, I offer the following.

The word *hammock* came into the English language from two different sources, from two different directions, and almost certainly at two different times. Probably the most familiar to most people is the usage introduced into Europe by the West Indian expeditions of Christopher Columbus. These trips took back the Arawak Indian word *hamaca*, which later was rendered as *hammock* in English. This refers to the suspended cloth bed used widely in the West Indies, Meso-America, and South America. The European import took place in the first few decades of the 1500s, appearing first in Columbus' notes, and later in print by Oveido in 1527.

From the East a similar word was introduced into European languages. In Arabic and several of the related languages, the word *hamada*, or something very similar to that spelling, refers to an island or cluster of trees. I have been unable to pin down the actual date of transfer of this word into western Europe, but it may have been



A hammock in use in a thatched building in Brazil. In Portuguese these beds are called *redes*, which means a net. (Photo by D.F. Austin)

around the time of Marco Polo in the 1200s. In English publications the word *hammock*, a variant of *hamada*, was printed first in the 1550s, and was considered specifically a nautical term. Thus, an island or mound of trees viewed on the skyline from a ship was called a *hammock*. Except for a sea of sand instead of water, this is in complete agreement with the usage in Arabic.

Curiously, our modern English dictionaries contend that the correct word is *hummock*. I consider this curious, because the first published accounts spelled it *hammock*. Apparently linguists have concluded that *hammock* is an unintended variant of *hummock*, or at least an archaic usage, and it is documented that *hummock* is an English word derived from Germanic sources.

With a little searching one may verify that there are two words spelled differently, with totally different meanings and origins in English, both *hammock* and *hummock*. A *hummock* is a mound of land; it may or may not have a hammock growing on its top. *Ham-*



A tropical hammock surrounded by prairie and dwarf mangroves in Everglades National Park. (Photo by D.F. Austin)

mocks are almost always found on hummocks (elevated areas), but the words were independently derived. So, hammocks may be hung in hammocks that grow on hummocks.

People have also been trying to define, in ecological terms, the kinds of hammocks that occur in Florida. There appear to have developed two opposing schools of thought. Again, not surprisingly, they came from different directions.

The oldest ideas came from Bahamian and Cuban people living in the Florida Keys and nearby areas. These people, having seen truly tropical plant associations (i.e., between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn), realized the West Indian nature of hammocks in southern Florida. Their contention, and that of the scientific group that follows them, is that certain hammocks in southern Florida are tropical, and both floristically and structurally resemble forests (hammocks, copses, *isla de mata*) that occur from the Bahamas and Cuba to Venezuela. Certain hammocks in Florida are West Indian Tropical Forests in all senses except that they grow on the mainland and outside the political limits of the tropics.

The other ideas developed with northern European/Americans mostly from temperate zones. These people contend that hammocks in southern Florida are nothing more than slight variants or phases of temperate forests. In Louisiana they might be called a *chenier* (oak forest), and would belong to the northern Florida temperate hammock type. This school of thought says that southern Florida hammocks with a predominance of tropical plants are nothing more than a slightly different form of the temperate hammock. Thus, tropical hammock (the term used in southern Florida) is considered inaccurate, and has been changed to tropical or subtropical variants of temperate hammock.

These are the problems and origins to date. We can trace back most of the origins of the words because the time depth is comparatively shallow. Tracing the origins of the floras, and application of the words used to describe them is more difficult and open to more opinion. My opinion on the tropical vs. temperate tack is clear in this discussion and elsewhere. I invite comparison of our tropical hammocks to Semi-deciduous Tropical Forests anywhere in the West Indies. A visit to the Bahamian or Yucatecan or Venezuelan forests, or anywhere in between, should settle the problem in anyone's mind.