

On the Relation of the Inhabitants of Islands to those of the nearest Mainland.

The most striking and important fact for us is the affinity of the species which inhabit islands to those of the nearest mainland, without being actually the same. Numerous instances could be given. The Galapagos Archipelago, situated under the equator, lies at a distance of between 500 and 600 miles from the shores of South America. Here almost every product of the land and of the water bears the unmistakable stamp of the American continent. There are twenty-six land birds; of these twenty-one or perhaps twenty-three are ranked as distinct species, and would commonly be assumed to have been here created; yet the close affinity of most of these birds to American species is manifest in every character in their habits, gestures, and tones of voice. So it is with the other animals, and with a large proportion of the plants, as shown by Dr. Hooker in his admirable Flora of this archipelago. The naturalist, looking at the inhabitants of these volcanic islands in the Pacific, distant several hundred miles from the continent, feels that he is standing on American land. Why should this be so? Why should the species which are supposed to have been created in the Galapagos Archipelago, and nowhere else, bear so plainly the stamp of affinity to those created in America? There is nothing in the conditions of life, in the geological nature of the islands, in their height or climate, or in the proportions in which the several classes are associated together, which closely resembles the conditions of the South American coast. In fact, there is a considerable dissimilarity in all these respects. On the other hand, there is a considerable degree of resemblance in the volcanic nature of the soil, in the climate, height, and size of the islands, between the Galapagos and Cape Verde Archipelagos: but what an entire and absolute difference in their inhabitants! The inhabitants of the Cape Verde Islands are related to those of Africa, like those of the Galapagos to America. Facts, such as these, admit of no sort of explanation on the ordinary view of independent creation; whereas, on the view here maintained, it is obvious that the Galapagos Islands would be likely to receive colonists from America, whether by occasional means of transport or (though I do not believe in this doctrine) by formerly continuous land, and the Cape Verde Islands from Africa; such colonists would be liable to modification,— the principle of inheritance still betraying their original birthplace.

Many analogous facts could be given: indeed it is an almost universal rule that the endemic productions of islands are related to those of the nearest continent, or of the nearest large island. The exceptions are few, and most of them can be explained. Thus, although Kerguelen Land stands nearer to Africa than to America, the plants are related, and that very closely, as we know from Dr. Hooker's account, to those of America: but on the view that this island has been mainly stocked by seeds brought with earth and stones on icebergs, drifted by the prevailing currents, this anomaly disappears. New Zealand in its endemic plants is much more closely related to Australia, the nearest mainland, than to any other region: and this is what might have been expected; but it is also plainly related to South America, which, although the next nearest continent, is so enormously remote, that the fact becomes an anomaly. But this difficulty partially disappears on the view that New Zealand, South America, and the other southern lands, have been stocked in part from a nearly intermediate though distant point, namely, from the antarctic islands, when they were clothed with vegetation, during a warmer tertiary period, before the commencement of the last Glacial period. The affinity, which, though feeble, I am assured by Dr. Hooker is real, between the flora of the south-western corner of Australia and of the Cape of Good Hope, is a far more remarkable case; but this affinity is confined to the plants, and will, no doubt, some day be explained.

The same law which has determined the relationship between the inhabitants of islands and the nearest mainland, is sometimes displayed on a small scale, but in a most interesting manner, within the limits of the same archipelago. Thus each separate island of the Galapagos Archipelago is tenanted, and the fact is a marvellous one, by many distinct species; but these species are related to each other in a very much closer manner than to the inhabitants of the American continent, or of any other quarter of the world. This is what might have been expected, for islands situated so near to each other would almost necessarily receive immigrants from the same original source, and from each other. But how is it that many of the immigrants have been differently modified, though only in a small degree, in islands situated within sight of each other, having the same geological nature, the same height, climate, etc? This long appeared to me a great difficulty: but it arises in chief part from the deeply-seated error of considering the physical conditions of a country as the most important; whereas it cannot be disputed that the nature of the other species with which each has to compete, is at least as important, and generally a far more important element of success. Now if we look to the species which inhabit the Galapagos Archipelago, and are likewise found in other parts of the world, we find that they differ considerably in the several islands. This difference might indeed have been expected if the islands have been stocked by occasional means of transport — a seed, for instance, of one plant having been brought to one island, and that of another plant to another island, though all proceeding from the same general source. Hence, when in former times an immigrant first settled on one of the islands, or when it subsequently spread from one to another, it would undoubtedly be exposed to different conditions in the different islands, for it would have to compete with a different set of organisms; a plant, for instance, would find the ground best-fitted for it occupied by somewhat different species in the different islands, and would be exposed to the attacks of somewhat different enemies. If, then, it varied, natural selection would probably favour different varieties in the different islands. Some species, however, might spread and yet retain the same character throughout the group, just as we see some species spreading widely throughout a continent and remaining the same.

The really surprising fact in this case of the Galapagos Archipelago, and in a lesser degree in some analogous cases, is that each new species after being formed in any one island, did not spread quickly to the other islands. But the islands, though in sight of each other, are separated by deep arms of the sea, in most cases wider than the British Channel, and there is no reason to suppose that they have at any former period been continuously united. The currents of the sea are rapid and deep between the islands, and gales of wind are extraordinarily rare; so that the islands are far more effectually separated from each other than they appear on a map. Nevertheless, some of the species, both of those found in other parts of the world and of those confined to the archipelago, are common to the several islands; and we may infer from the present manner of distribution that they have spread from one island to the others. But we often take, I think, an erroneous view of the probability of closely allied species invading each other's territory, when put into free intercommunication. Undoubtedly, if one species has any advantage over another, it will in a very brief time wholly or in part supplant it; but if both are equally well fitted for their own places, both will probably hold their separate places for almost any length of time. Being familiar with the fact that many species, naturalised through man's agency, have spread with astonishing rapidity over wide areas, we are apt to infer that most species would thus spread; but we should remember that the species which become naturalised in new countries are not generally closely allied to the aboriginal inhabitants, but are very distinct forms, belonging in a large proportion of cases, as shown by Alph. de Candolle, to distinct genera. In the Galapagos Archipelago, many even of the birds, though so well adapted for flying from island to island, differ on the different islands; thus there are three closely allied species of mocking-thrush, each confined to its own island. Now let us suppose the mocking-thrush of Chatham Island to be blown to Charles Island, which has its own mocking-thrush; why should it succeed in establishing itself there? We may safely infer that

Charles Island is well stocked with its own species, for annually more eggs are laid and young birds hatched than can possibly be reared; and we may infer that the mocking-thrush peculiar to Charles Island is at least as well fitted for its home as is the species peculiar to Chatham Island. Sir C. Lyell and Mr. Wollaston have communicated to me a remarkable fact bearing on this subject; namely, that Madeira and the adjoining islet of Porto Santo possess many distinct but representative species of land-shells, some of which live in crevices of stone; and although large quantities of stone are annually transported from Porto Santo to Madeira, yet this latter island has not become colonised by the Porto Santo species: nevertheless, both islands have been colonised by some European land-shells, which no doubt had some advantage over the indigenous species. From these considerations I think we need not greatly marvel at the endemic species which inhabit the several islands of the Galapagos Archipelago not having all spread from island to island. On the same continent, also, pre-occupation has probably played an important part in checking the commingling of the species which inhabit different districts with nearly the same physical conditions. Thus, the south-east and south-west corners of Australia have nearly the same physical conditions, and are united by continuous land, yet they are inhabited by a vast number of distinct mammals, birds, and plants; so it is, according to Mr. Bates, with the butterflies and other animals inhabiting the great, open, and continuous valley of the Amazons.

The same principle which governs the general character of the inhabitants of oceanic islands, namely, the relation to the source whence colonists could have been most easily derived, together with their subsequent modification, is of the widest application throughout nature. We see this on every mountain-summit, in every lake and marsh. For Alpine species, excepting in as far as the same species have become widely spread during the Glacial epoch, are related to those of the surrounding lowlands; thus we have in South America, Alpine humming-birds, Alpine rodents, Alpine plants, &c., all strictly belonging to American forms; and it is obvious that a mountain, as it became slowly upheaved, would be colonised from the surrounding lowlands. So it is with the inhabitants of lakes and marshes, excepting in so far as great facility of transport has allowed the same forms to prevail throughout large portions of the world. We see the same principle in the character of most of the blind animals inhabiting the caves of America and of Europe. Other analogous facts could be given. It will, I believe, be found universally true, that wherever in two regions, let them be ever so distant, many closely allied or representative species occur, there will likewise be found some identical species; and wherever many closely-allied species occur, there will be found many forms which some naturalists rank as distinct species, and others as mere varieties; these doubtful forms showing us the steps in the process of modification.

The relation between the power and extent of migration in certain species, either at the present or at some former period, and the existence at remote points of the world of closely allied species, is shown in another and more general way. Mr. Gould remarked to me long ago, that in those genera of birds which range over the world, many of the species have very wide ranges. I can hardly doubt that this rule is generally true, though difficult of proof. Among mammals, we see it strikingly displayed in Bats, and in a lesser degree in the Felidæ and Canidæ. We see the same rule in the distribution of butterflies and beetles. So it is with most of the inhabitants of fresh water, for many of the genera in the most distinct classes range over the world, and many of the species have enormous ranges. It is not meant that all, but that some of the species have very wide ranges in the genera which range very widely. Nor is it meant that the species in such genera have, on an average, a very wide range; for this will largely depend on how far the process of modification has gone; for instance, two varieties of the same species inhabit America and Europe, and thus the species has an immense range; but, if variation were to be carried a little further, the two varieties would be ranked as distinct species, and their range would be greatly reduced. Still less is it meant, that species which have the capacity of crossing

barriers and ranging widely, as in the case of certain powerfully-winged birds, will necessarily range widely; for we should never forget that to range widely implies not only the power of crossing barriers, but the more important power of being victorious in distant lands in the struggle for life with foreign associates. But according to the view that all the species of a genus, though distributed to the most remote points of the world, are descended from a single progenitor, we ought to find, and I believe as a general rule we do find, that some at least of the species range very widely.

We should bear in mind that many genera in all classes are of ancient origin, and the species in this case will have had ample time for dispersal and subsequent modification. There is also reason to believe, from geological evidence, that within each great class the lower organisms change at a slower rate than the higher; consequently they will have had a better chance of ranging widely and of still retaining the same specific character. This fact, together with that of the seeds and eggs of most lowly organised forms being very minute and better fitted for distant transportal, probably accounts for a law which has long been observed, and which has lately been discussed by Alph. de Candolle in regard to plants, namely, that the lower any group of organisms stands the more widely it ranges.

The relations just discussed,— namely, lower organisms ranging more widely than the higher,— some of the species of widely-ranging genera themselves ranging widely,— such facts, as alpine, lacustrine, and marsh productions being generally related to those which live on the surrounding low lands and dry lands,— the striking relationship between the inhabitants of islands and those of the nearest mainland — the still closer relationship of the distinct inhabitants of the islands of the same archipelago — are inexplicable on the ordinary view of the independent creation of each species, but are explicable if we admit colonisation from the nearest or readiest source, together with the subsequent adaptation of the colonists to their new homes.

Revision #1

Created 13 August 2019 13:24:19 by Textpedia

Updated 13 August 2019 13:24:38 by Textpedia