

## AT THE THREE KINGS ISLANDS



by Anthony Wright, Botanist, Auckland Museum

A visit to rugged little West Island in the Three Kings Group in December of last year afforded the first ever opportunity for the rare *Elingamita johnsonii* to be photographed in the wild. With its glossy karaka-like leaves and spectacular bunches of bright red berries, it has great potential as a garden plant.



Precipitous West Island from the south-east. The main *Elingamita* population is found beneath the pohutukawa forest on the upper slopes.

### Inflorescence of *Elingamita johnsonii*.

The Three Kings Islands lie some forty kilometres from the northern tip of the North Island and are little visited due to the difficulty of landing on their steep cliffs from the surrounding tempestuous seas. The four main islands support at least ten endemic species of plants — that is, species known to grow naturally in no other place. Of these endemics, two are represented by single plants only: *Tecomanthe speciosa* and *Pennantia baylisiana*. The former, a vigorous liane, is widely cultivated on mainland New Zealand. The latter is listed in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the world's rarest tree. Not only is the *Pennantia* reduced to a single tree, but that tree is female. The species is apparently dioecious — that is, male and female flowers are produced on different plants — and no male tree survives to pollinate the lone female.

But the record for the least viewed tree must go to *Elingamita johnsonii*. Confined to tiny West Island in the Three Kings Group, the genus is named after the steamship *Elingamite* which was wrecked on West Island in 1902 with considerable loss of life. The species name commemorates Major Magnus Johnson, its discoverer.

After the *Elingamite* wreck, pressure was brought to bear on the Government by shipping interests to erect a lighthouse on West Island. Marine Department officers investigated, and their report clearly illustrates the difficulties