

Acacia for Africa!

Are all Africa's acacias now going to be called *Senegalia*?

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Without much, if any official, consultation with all African, South American and Asian citizens, the Australians with the help of Dick Brummitt from the U.K. have quietly sneaked in under the radar to claim the generic name *Acacia* for their wattles. For the moment they have won the battle - but the war, I am sure, will rage on. What this means is that if we Africans, Americans and Asians accept this jingoistic coup by a single nation, our acacias that grow in most African countries (if not all) will henceforth be in the genus *Senegalia* - with the exception of the ana tree *Faidherbia albida* that had a name change some years ago - and I can still remember the disquiet and rumblings when that happened! Is that what we want? Is that consultative and democratic? I do not even think it is fair!

All this happened rather quietly without any media exposure when the Nomenclature Section of the XVII International Botanical Congress in Vienna voted to accept a very carefully orchestrated decision of the Spermatophyta Committee's recommendation to 'conserve' the name *Acacia* by 're-typifying' it. And this decision was subsequently ratified at the Plenary Session of the Congress on the 23 July 2005. According to the 'rules' this is now all signed, sealed and is a done deal! (For those who may be interested in the chronology of the decision making process, visit the website www.worldwide-wattle.com/infogallery/nameissue/chronology.phy.)

Although Maslin and Orchard (same website as above) contend that the issue had been hotly debated over the last few years, I had never heard, read or been told anything of this ploy; and my prime interest in life is the trees of southern Africa (having edited Coates Palgrave and written a number of tree books myself). Thus I am hardly a bystander, but it does seem that a particular group of botanists, the taxonomists, have been discussing the change, but this change involves not just taxonomists, but ecologists, conservationists and horticulturalists, not to mention the whole tourism, hospitality and film-making industry globally.

Thus, as the current Chair of the Council of the Botanical Society of South Africa I am not sure I can, or should, let this matter rest without a fight. I am sure that there are many South Africans and other Africans (let alone South Americans and Asians) who will feel as aggrieved as I do - especially once they get to know what has happened, and the manner by which the decision was made. After all, the silhouette of an acacia in the sunset with a leopard in the branches or a giraffe browsing is an image that has lured countless tourists to the African savannas. Acacias and Africa are synonymous; our thorny savannas are historical and contemporary icons. We surely cannot allow the Australians to steal the name that

is as much a part of Africa as cheetah and the Big Five?

Many of us know that plant names change from time to time as further research is done. Professional and non-professional botanists alike find name changing difficult to comprehend. There are, however, very strict rules that govern when and how a name can be changed to protect the whole system of naming plants from being abused. The accepted rule is that the earliest published name has precedence. Though it seems even this age-old rule can now be waived under special circumstances - which is what the Australians claimed. And the Chair of the Spermatophyta Committee Dick Brummitt threw his weight behind the Australian 'bid'. The Australians even managed to get some 250 people to email Brummitt their support. However, I analysed that list and only six of the supporters were non-Australians - one each from California, Canada, China, India, Indonesia and New York.

Brummitt took the unusual step of publishing the following summary on the bulletin board at the meeting:

Summary of reasons why committees have voted for the conservation of *Acacia* with an Australian type as proposed

1. There are 1000 species of *Acacia* in Australia which would otherwise be called *Racosperma*, which constitute by far the biggest genus on that continent, much bigger than *Eucalyptus* for example
2. There is a multi-billion dollar agroforestry industry based on the Australian species which are now being grown on a vast scale in a number of other countries
3. The name *Acacia* has a much higher profile among the general public in Australia, where it is their national symbol, than in any other continent including Africa, as evidenced by the numbers of people who sent the letters displayed alongside
4. There is a large horticultural industry in Australia based on their native species, which are used in a very great number of different ways
5. Many of the 1000 species in Australia are restricted endemics which have attracted local and national legislation, and nomenclatural changes will affect the large number of scientists and administrators who the Australian federal and state governments employs in connection with the genus
6. If the proposal is not accepted, 13 times as many species in Australia will have to change their name as in Africa
7. Outside Australia 55% of the native species are going to change their names to *Senegalia* anyway, whatever decision is made on the type of *Acacia*
8. Because of the cultivation (and escape from cultivation)

of many Australian species outside Australia, many people in those countries already think of *Acacia* as meaning 'the Australian species'

9. Retaining the name *Acacia* for fewer than half of the species outside Australia will lead to considerable confusion in Africa and elsewhere

10. Nomenclaturists must take note of the needs of those who use the names of plants

It would seem that Brummitt's support went unopposed, but I could put forward valid arguments to significantly contest most of the points raised and add others.

There is no doubt that the decision is contestable because even in the committee where the vote was taken there had to be a 60% majority, and with fifteen members the vote was nine to six – just enough. Was that committee indeed representative? Can we let a group of specialists make a decision that impacts on the lives of many millions of citizens? My contention is that a majority of countries were rolled by the Australian case, and I suggest that we Africans take up the fight and take this to NEPAD, the African Union and even the United Nations. The war is for more than just the taxonomists to take a decision, we leave plant nomenclature in their hands, but ultimately they are responsible to the masses – especially when they set aside the normal rule and make a special case without a mandate from all those interested and affected parties.

Naturally the Australians are trumpeting their 'victory' claiming, on the above mentioned website, that the change is an 'excellent outcome, not only for Australia but for the hundreds of people round the world who use Australian species for a wide variety of purposes'. They also claim that that 'the decision means that less disruption will occur worldwide by keeping the name *Acacia* for species of the Australian group than would occur had the name been applied to groups that predominate outside Australia'.

Such a load of twaddle - they are simply putting one country's interests over the whole of Africa including Madagascar, many Middle East and Sub-Continent countries and a number of South and Central America countries. This is more like one country against half of the rest of the world!

Do they simply believe that since they are a First World country they can

ride roughshod over the rest of us?

In conclusion I might add that a well-recognized group of some thirty-seven taxonomists are appealing the decision and have written a detailed paper, which they have submitted to the reputable journal *Taxon*.

It remains to be seen whether *Taxon* will publish the paper and if published, whether the arguments made against the case of moving the type of *Acacia* to Australia will be upheld. Amongst those taxonomists are a number of South Africans in SANBI, as well as experts globally, not just based in one continent.

Thus the jury is still out, and it is

imperative for all those who wish to make their objections felt to email the BotSoc at info@botanicalsociety.org.za as soon as possible please. 🌿

Who was first?

In the case of *Acacia* the oldest named specimen is from Africa and was described in 1753 AD. It was *Acacia scorpioides* (L.) W.F. Wright which is a universally accepted synonym of *Acacia nilotica* (L.) Delile.

In fact the name *Acacia* is from the Greek *akis* meaning a sharp point; describing the thorns (and Australian acacias have NO THORNS, though to be fair a good few of their some 1 000 species do have rather sharp spine-tipped leaves, but that is hardly the issue here).

Camel thorn, or kameeldoring, *Acacia erioloba*. Painting by Blythe Pascoe.

