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Department of Biodiversity,  
Conservation and Attractions

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Photography by Chris Done

Lithography from Baine's sketch of 1856

Boabs are the only Australian member of the genus *Adansonia*, comprising some 10 species with possibly more sub-species. Eight separate species are present on the island of Madagascar in the Western Indian Ocean. The other two, which are closely related, are the baobab, or monkey-bread (*A. digitata*), of the tropical African mainland and the boob. Paleontology and geneology suggest that both *Adansonia digitata* and *A. gregorii* share origins with the Madagascan species, probably some 190 million years ago. It is not uncommon to find African plant material washed up on the Western Australian coast. It seems likely that fruit, seed, or even whole trees were washed into the Indian Ocean in floodwaters, and eventually drifted to the Kimberley and African coasts and became established. They eventually developed, in isolation, the minor differences that today make them separate species.

The baobab was transported through the middle east to India and Java. Arab traders plying the Indian Ocean in dhows probably used them to create a supply of ascorbic acid (vitamin C) along the route, to prevent scurvy.

Australian aboriginals placed great importance on boob trees. Grey noted in 1838 that nearly all "gouty-stems" had evidence of an aboriginal fire site beneath them. Boob fruits are an important dietary supplement. The pulp contains malic, tartaric and ascorbic acids and the seeds have high protein value. The pulp is eaten dry or mixed with water as a beverage. Boobs can be a source of water, trapped in hollows inside the trees or at the base of branches.

Moisture can also be extracted by chewing stem or root fibre. Strands of bark can be rolled to form twine, the gum used as glue, and the fruit carved as ornaments. Two of the aboriginal names for the boob are "gadawon" (Kununurra) and "djungeri" (Kalumburu).

Boobs are extremely hardy. Examples can be seen of trees completely removed from the soil by wind, floodwater or earthworks, yet they have continued growing and taken root in the new location. This has been exploited and large boobs have been successfully transplanted; for example, some of the street trees of Derby.

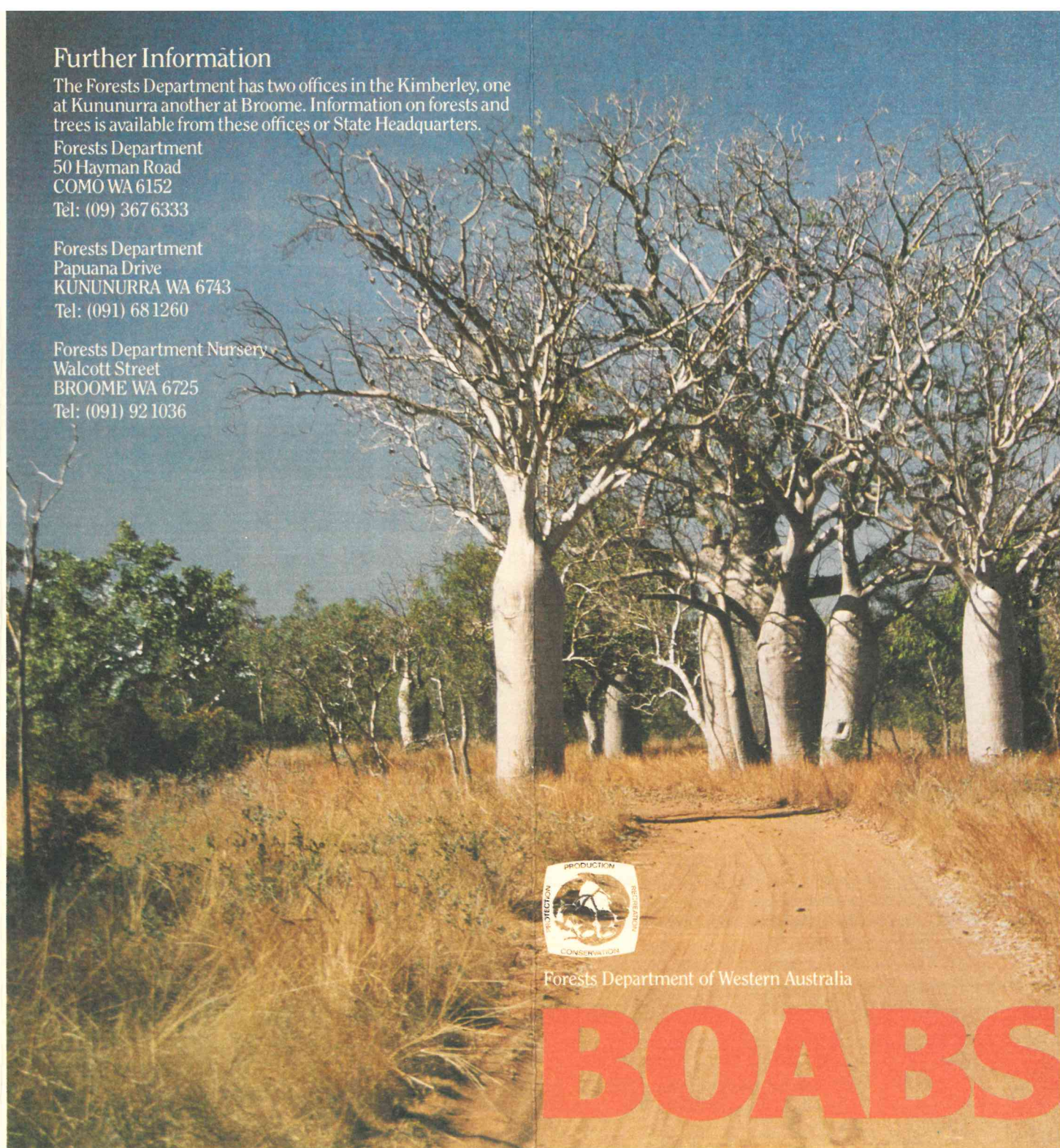
## Further Information

The Forests Department has two offices in the Kimberley, one at Kununurra another at Broome. Information on forests and trees is available from these offices or State Headquarters.

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KUNUNURRA WA 6743  
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Forests Department Nursery  
Walcott Street  
BROOME WA 6725  
Tel: (091) 92 1036



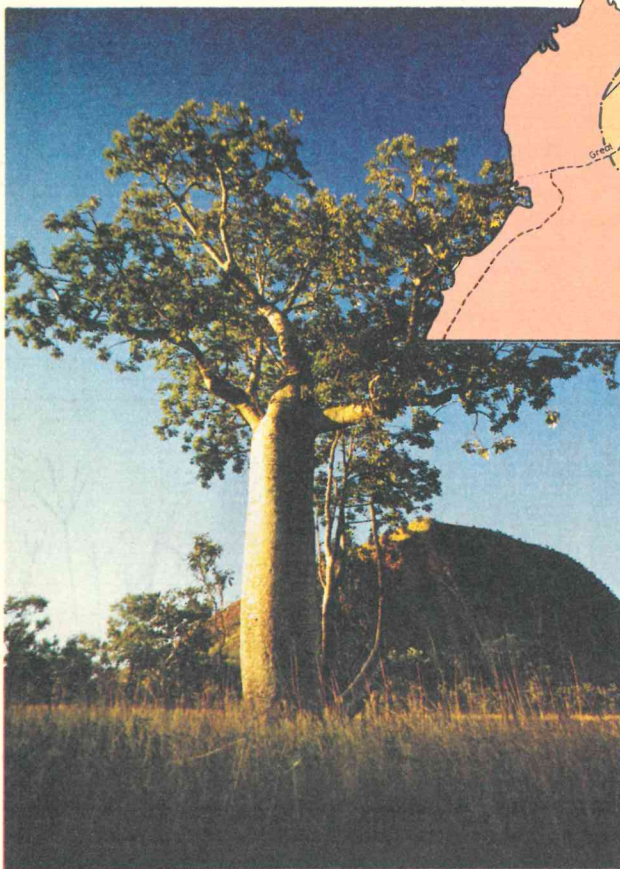
Forests Department of Western Australia

# BOABS



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The boab tree (*Adansonia gregorii*) is a large deciduous tree occurring on sandy plains, creek beds and stony ridges throughout the Kimberley region of Western Australia, and in the Victoria and Fitzmaurice river basins of Northern Territory.



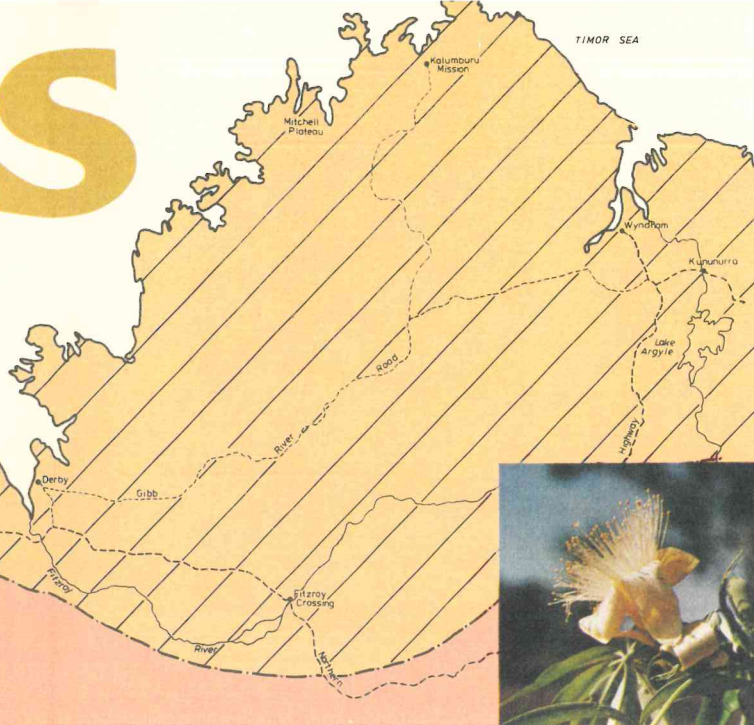
Photography by Cliff Winfield

Large boab Great Northern Highway

The distinctive, immense trunk varies from bottle-shape to unusual, even grotesque shapes, sometimes with many stems. The boab can have a girth of 20m and canopies over 25m high. Comprised of 5-9 leaflets up to 13 cm long, the boab's leaves are green on the upper side with white silky matted hair underneath. During the dry season leaves fall revealing the characteristic bare-branched skeleton. Leaf-fall enhances the boab's drought tolerance. The boab's bark varies from dull

grey-brown to bronze in colour, is smooth in texture, and pock-marked or dimpled. The wood is soft and spongy. Boabs have white waxy flowers about 10 cm long. The fruit, resembling pendulous gourds, is green and hairy at first, maturing to a brown velvet-textured surface on woody but brittle shells. Mature fruit can be up to 25 cm long and 15 cm diameter. Inside, dozens of hard, black, round, sometimes kidney-shaped seeds approximately 1 cm diameter are embedded in pulpy cells.

Boab family – Logue Creek



Flower

Photography by Chris Done

Seedlings are relatively quick growing (about 2 m in the first 3 years), and girth measurements of 2 m in 30 year old trees have been recorded at a site on the Great Northern Highway. The tree alongside the old Cable Station (Courthouse) at Broome is believed to be less than one hundred years old, yet it has a girth of 7.01m. Often the seeds accumulate under trees, and in ideal conditions the simultaneous germination of thousands of seeds takes place. Subsequently, the survivors beneath the canopy of the parent tree create the impression of a family gathering.

The longevity of boabs is legendary, the oldest, perhaps aged over a thousand years. Mr Aeneas Gunn of Elsey Station, N.T., (1895) wrote that: "no-one, through hundreds of miles where this tree grows, has ever seen a dead gouty-stem tree"; which is how boabs were known at the time. The name "boab" is probably a mispronunciation derived from the "baobab" of Africa.

The first Englishman to describe Australian boabs was Lieutenant Phillip Parker-King, who in 1820 carved his cutter's name on a "gouty-stem tree" at Careening Cove, near the mouth of the Prince Regent River. This practice was remarked upon by Grey in his visit to the Kimberley coast in 1838, and he noted that aborigines carved marks in boabs, apparently to record the number of fruit taken.

Another mark, signifying the encroachment of civilisation, was carved into a boab on the banks of the Victoria River, in 1855, by celebrated explorer Augustus Gregory. He was leading an expedition into the Northern Territory and northeast Kimberley, and had with him the famous botanist Ferdinand von Mueller. Botanical specimens were collected and in 1857 the species was published as *Adansonia gregorii*, in honour of Gregory.

Lt Parker King's carvings



Photography by Jenny Hunt