

When the first specimens of an interesting and unusual plant turned up at the Western Australian Herbarium in late 2012, it created considerable excitement among the botanists. The specimens were clearly of a species of kapok (*Cochlospermum*)—a distinctive genus of small trees characteristic of areas in northern Australia, from the Kimberley to Cape York, with distinct wet and dry seasons. Kapoks are spectacular in their flowering habits—they lose all their leaves during the dry season, then flower gloriously on bare stems before the arrival of the first wet-season rains. Their flowers are very beautiful, large and golden yellow, often with a contrasting centre of red stamens.

But the new specimens came from a very odd place—a dry, semi-arid granite ridge in the Pilbara, south of Port Hedland, nearly a thousand kilometres from the only other *Cochlospermum* known from Western Australia, a species thought to be restricted to the Kimberley. Close study of the specimens and comparison with all other Australian species of *Cochlospermum* showed that it was a new and remarkable species.

One of the many great things about discovering and then naming a new species is the opportunity to choose a suitable name. Under international rules for naming organisms, the name must be formed from Latin or latinised words. Within that constraint, a taxonomist tries to choose a name that is euphonious, appropriate and relevant. By convention, names either describe some distinctive feature of the new species or honour a significant individual who is either associated with the new species in some way or is worthy of honour for other reasons. Naming after an individual gives taxonomists a unique way of acknowledging people who have made significant contributions to science, conservation or taxonomy.

In this case, it was decided to name the new species in honour of Keiran McNamara, then Director General of the Department of Environment and Conservation. Keiran was a very appropriate recipient of such an honour—he had provided funding to the herbarium over the previous decade that had resulted directly or indirectly in the



Cochlospermum macnamarae

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discovery, study, naming and description of more than 150 new Western Australian plant species. Few other government officers can claim such a direct impact on taxonomy, and of course discovering and naming a new species has a direct impact on its conservation.

The new species was named *Cochlospermum macnamarae* in record time, less than 18 months after its first discovery. Sadly Keiran passed away after a brief illness a few days after the species was formally named. His legacy is many-faceted, ranging from an inspiring network of nature reserves and national parks throughout WA to a world-class system for protecting all Western Australia’s natural areas and native species. And one rare, fascinating and very beautiful

plant in the Pilbara quietly bears his name and honours his achievements.

Above *Cochlospermum macnamarae* in full flower.

Photo – Daniel Brassington

Discovered is a regular series prepared by scientists at the Western Australian Museum (Department of Culture and the Arts) and Western Australian Herbarium (Department of Parks and Wildlife). Each article highlights new and noteworthy discoveries of plants and animals in Western Australia, and offer insights into the work of the scientists whose jobs involve discovering, naming and describing Western Australia’s marvellous living riches.