

FEATURE ARTICLE

The name of the Boab

As everyone knows, the scientific name of the Boab is *Adansonia gregorii*, right? Well, not necessarily. In a recent taxonomic revision of *Adansonia* (Baum 1995), the species received a name change to *Adansonia gibbosa*. The discoverer of the Boab, Allan Cunningham, saw only fruiting plants and thought the plant was a *Capparis*, which belongs in quite a different family to the Boab. For that reason and also because Cunningham's posthumously published journal was not intended as a formal taxonomic work, plus the brevity of the descriptive observations on the species, resulted in the name being both overlooked and unrecognised as applying to the Boab. The connection was made a decade ago by Gordon Guymer of the Queensland Herbarium, but he ultimately decided not to formally make the change. Unfortunately his findings came to the attention of another scientist, David Baum, who considered it necessary to change the name. In this article I want to inform CALM users of plant names that this re-naming is in dispute, and that the established name, *A. gregorii*, should continue to be used for the present.

Until recently it was a common enough practice to replace the name of a plant with another if an earlier published name was found. This was because the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature (ICBN), which governs the scientific naming of plants, emphasised priority of publication as a criterion by which to objectively decide among alternative names for a given species.

It has long been the fond hope of taxonomists that, over time, the correct name would be established for all species of plants, and that the discovery of earlier names would dwindle completely away. This should have led to a stable nomenclature, except for when research showed that a plant was classified incorrectly, and thus had to be placed in a different genus, or was recognised as being the same as another species. Such name changes are regarded as unavoidable, given our system of naming, because they are the result of a genuine increase in knowledge. Unfortunately people have continued to find earlier names at a high rate, leading to many name changes for no other reason than strict adherence to a set of rules. Consequently pressure grew to modify the rules.

In 1993 a change was made to the ICBN which permits the conserving of names against earlier, rarely used or long forgotten names, and a strong recommendation was made to taxonomists to use the provision to avoid disadvantageous name changes for purely nomenclatural reasons. The re-naming of the Boab was for purely nomenclatural reasons, and is disadvantageous, so an application is being prepared (Guymer & Wilson, in prep.) to overturn the change and re-instate the name *A. gregorii*. This will take some time, so until the matter is resolved, it is advisable to continue to use the familiar name.

Reference

Baum, D.A. (1995). A systematic revision of *Adansonia* (Bombacaceae). *Annals of the Missouri Botanical Garden* 82: 440-470.

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