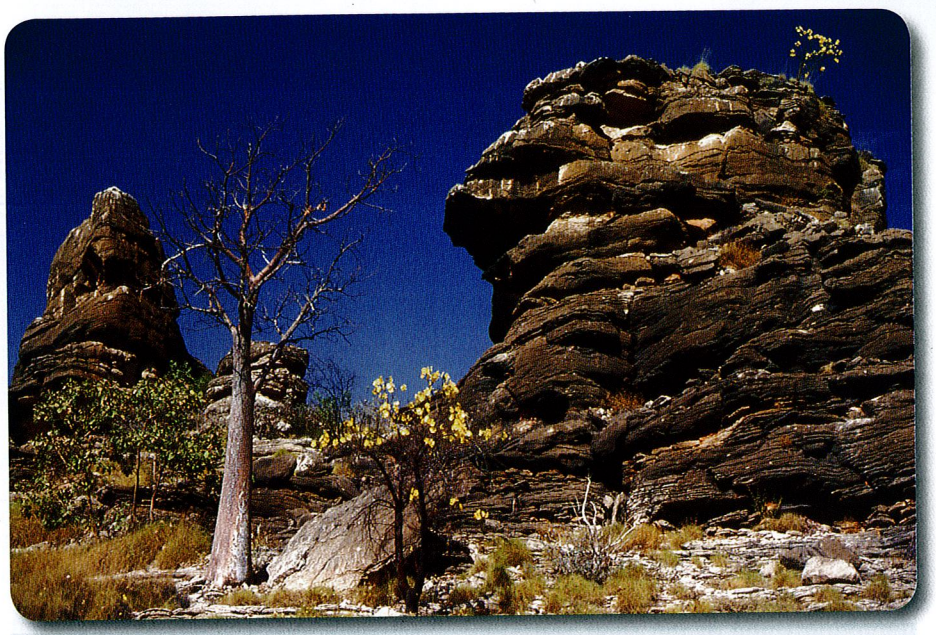
THE BOAB: BEAUTIFUL AND BIZARRE

Penny Hussey

Go to the Kimberley, and the western edge of the Northern Territory, and you will find one of the most unusual-looking of all trees – the Boab (or Baobab). Bottle-trunked, stubby-armed and with huge, gourd-like fruit, there's nothing else quite like it – well, except for its relatives in Africa and Madagascar.



A young Boab in the Oscar Range. The yellow flowering bushes are Cochlosperum fraseri. *Photo: Penny Hussey*

Baobabs are in the family Bombacaceae, which has some 200 species of mostly trees (some shrubs) in 20-30 genera. They are widespread in tropical countries, especially tropical America. There are eight species of Baobabs and they are in the genus *Adansonia*. This name was given by Linnaeus to honour the French naturalist Michel Adanson who saw this tree during his travels in Senegal between 1748-54. It greatly impressed him, and he wrote a long screed about it, including the fact that he drank an infusion of the leaves to cure himself of fever. He calculated that one large tree, some 30 feet in diameter, must be (then) 5,150 years old! The leaves are palmate, with leaflets spread like the fingers of a hand, so the African Baobab is called *A. digitata*. It is widespread in Africa, and all parts of the tree are used by local people in a multitude of ways.

Madagascar is the centre of diversity for the genus, it has six species, three of which are endangered, mostly by clearing for farming.

The final species, *A. gregorii*, is found in northern Australia. It is a large, swollen-stemmed deciduous tree, with digitate leaves, large white flowers and large fruits. The specific name was given to it by Baron Frederick von Müeller, to commemorate the surveyor Sir Augustus Charles Gregory who was the leader of the North Australian Exploring Expedition in 1855-6, on which Müeller was the botanist.

Many African farmsteads, such as this one near Tongo in northern Ghana, take advantage of the shade and other services provided by mature Baobab trees. Photo: Penny Hussey

Boabs are very useful trees. The fruits have black seeds embedded in white pith. Both can be eaten (the pith apparently tastes like sherbert) while the seeds can be pounded and made into a kind of bread. Bark from the roots can be beaten and used to make string. Hollows in the trunk or branches may hold water, and can be used for an emergency supply during drought. Cattlemen lop the young branches as emergency fodder for cattle. The outside of the ripe fruits is carved to make souvenirs for tourists. And there are odder uses – everyone must have heard of the 'Gaol Tree' near Derby!

Baobabs have soft bark, easy to carve. When Adanson was in Senegal, he recorded seeing trees

The bark is easy to carve and the tree carries on growing regardless, hence this record of Philip Parker King's exploration of the Kimberley coastline in the cutter HMC Mermaid in 1820. One of the crew recorded their campsite at Careening Bay by cutting into this Boab. Photo: Kevin Kenneally

carved by visiting Europeans, one in the 15th and the other in the 16th century. In September 1820, Lt. Phillip Parker King commanded the cutter "Mermaid" on a mission to chart that portion of the northern Australian coastline that had not been surveyed by Mathew Flinders, and needed somewhere to repair a leak. He beached the cutter at a suitable spot they named Careening Bay. While there, one of the crew carved the date and name of their vessel on a Boab trunk – now a tourist destination. King did not find Careening Bay a particularly comfortable campsite. He recorded in his diary: "Small lizards, centipedes and scorpions were numerous about our encampment; and the trees and bushes about the tents were infested with myriads of hornets and other insects, particularly mosquitoes and small sandflies, which annoyed us very much in the evening."

If you can't get to the Kimberley to see Boabs in the wild, you could always have a look at the transplanted specimens in Kings Park. Truly a tree to awe and inspire!

Illustration from "The Treasury of Botany", pub. 1866.

NEW BEARD VEGETATION MAP FOR WA

Between 1964 and 1981, John Beard, assisted by a number of dedicated botanists, mapped the pre-European vegetation of most of Western Australia at a scale of 1:250,000. Francis Smith mapped the existing vegetation (as of the early 1970's) of the far south-western corner. A new publication acknowledges the extraordinary vision and commitment of John Beard in providing WA with a comprehensive vegetation map.

A colour vegetation map for WA has been produced from the digitising of the Beard mapping, interpreting Smith's mapping across cleared areas. Over 900 vegetation associations were classified, largely following the framework developed by Beard, into 50 major vegetation types, five categories of bare and poorly-vegetated ground and 20 vegetation mosaics. The memoir explains how the data were derived and describes the units of vegetation shown on the map with the aid of individual distribution maps and photographs, as well as the relationship to bioregions and other details.

The 1:3,000,000 scale map gives a general impression of the vegetation of the State, as well as aspects of the geological, geomorphological and climatic patterns. It demonstrates the relationship between the vegetation and the bioregions. It provides one of the vegetation base-layers for NatureMap http://naturemap.dpaw.wa.gov.au. This more complex underlying spatial data layer (available from DAFWA: gis@agric.wa.gov.au) is currently being used for a wide range of research and planning purposes, including the on-going development of the terrestrial conservation reserve system.

The report and map is available as a download from http://www.dpaw.wa.gov.au/cswajournal

Copies have been sent to all Parks and Wildlife's regional and district offices. There are a limited number of hard copies and maps available from Science and Conservation Division.

If you would like a hard copy, and would use it for work, including landcare planning or teaching for example, contact Judith.Harvey@dpaw.wa.gov.au and a copy can be sent to your nearest Parks and Wildlife office for you to collect.