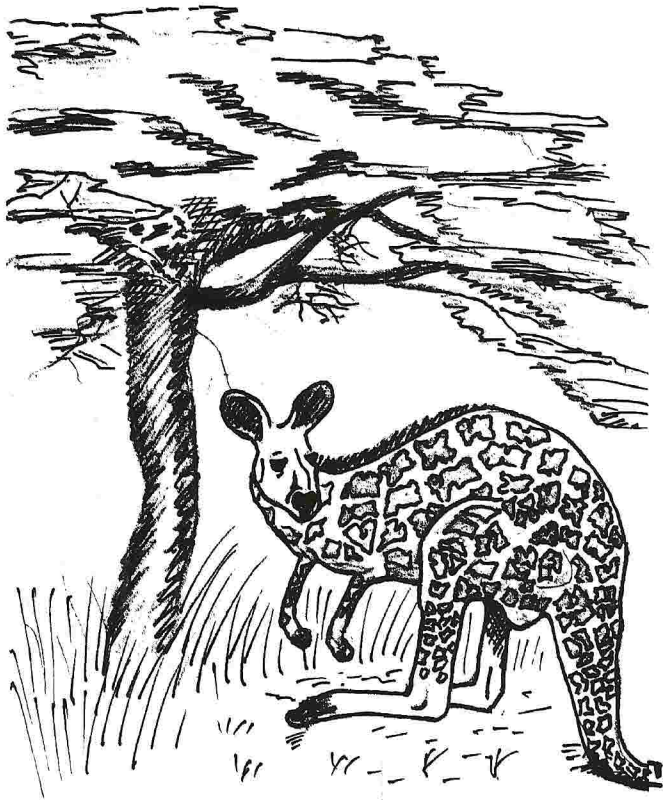


# HOW THE ROO ACQUIRED AN AFRICAN ICON

By Mike Bingham

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Giraffe by H. Goulding

Botanical names are often contentious. Take *Swartzia madagascariensis*, which recently was changed to *Bobgunnia madagascariensis*. Never mind that it celebrates an American botanist who may not have set foot in Africa, the problem is that it has nothing to do with the island off the east coast of Africa. Indeed, the fruits are adapted to dispersal by mainland African herbivores. Somebody boobed, so who cares? Well I do, but I can live with it.

The decision by a committee at a botanical conference in Melbourne in July is a far more serious affair, and the consequences will rumble on until a more satisfactory outcome is reached. The decision was to confirm the conservation of the name *Acacia* for an Australian species, a proposal that was put to the previous meeting of the Nomenclature Committee held in Vienna in 2005. What this means in Africa (and also in the Americas, Europe and Asia which are similarly affected) is that all our indigenous species will no longer have the name *Acacia*. The name will only be valid for species indigenous to Australia, namely the wattles.

Announcements put out to the public might give the impression that Australia has won a game of cricket, as though each side had equal claim to the name, and the Australian victory was through popular acclaim. In

Vienna the goalposts were moved and the motion was carried by a minority vote. The brief announcement by the secretary of the Committee after the Vienna meeting made no mention of precedence, hitherto the only criterion for validating names, except in very rare instances where no serious objections were raised. The application of the name *Acacia* goes back to classical Greek times, and the name refers to the thorns which occur in all non-Australian species, but in none of the Australian species.

*Acacia* is Africa's most iconic tree. Species such as *A.tortilis* are instantly recognizable, and feature on thousands of posters, greeting cards and advertisements. If there is just one such of the +/- 1000 Australian species please show it to me. Wattles, introduced to South Africa, grown for tannin for the leather industry, and fuel-wood, have invaded vast areas of sensitive habitats, and substantial budgets have been allocated by the government to their control.

Zambia, fortunately has no need or incentive to grow Australian species, and while a few have been introduced in small agroforestry trials, our own *Faidherbia albida* is considered a better candidate for this purpose, and is unlikely to be replaced any time soon.

The legume specialists at Kew have let it be known that they have no intention of complying with the Melbourne decision, and I doubt there are many European or African botanists who will do so. Some north Americans supported the Australian initiative, but then Australian botanists are by no means undivided in their opinions. This split will drive a wedge between the global botanical communities, and the International Botanical Congress must decide whether to compromise the rule of precedence, and take such issues as public sentiment and national pride into account.

For readers who wish to know more about the case these two papers, which can be downloaded free as pdfs, are recommended.

GERRY MOORE & 69 other authors, 2010. *Acacia*, the 2011 Nomenclature Section in Melbourne, and beyond. *Taxon* **59**: 1188-1195.

GERRY MOORE & 10 other authors, 2011. The *Acacia* controversy resulting from minority rule at the Vienna Nomenclature Section: Much more than arcane arguments and complex technicalities. *Taxon* **60**: 852-857.