



## Where have all Acacias gone?

On 13th July 2011 it was announced that, by decree of an international committee, all African *Acacias* are to vanish. No fear, the trees themselves should still be standing, hopefully, but now our savannahs and rivers are wooded with *Vachellia* trees. 250 years of *Acacia* history in Africa are now over, they say. How come?

As every Namib toktokkie knows, nature needs no names to live. Nevertheless, a beetle recognises another and has many different ways of knowing its own kind. That is why *Zophosis moralesi* is a species, it only mates with another that has those certain characteristics which make it *Zophosis moralesi*. A species is distinct because it exists in a confined gene pool. Organisms have many ways of recognising not only their own species, but also other organisms representing food, medicine, hosts, competitors, parasites and predators. To correctly recognise the other can be a matter of life or death, the continuation of a lineage, or its end.

For many reasons people need to reliably recognise species, and by naming them, we can also accumulate knowledge associated with them. We describe species in jargon using well-defined characteristics based on shape and recently also genes. Species names are convenient labels to refer to each. In 1735 the Swedish naturalist Carl Linneaus spelt out in his publication "Systema Naturae" the convention for classifying species, including the use of a unique *Genus species* name combination for each particular species, approved by an international committee.

Our iconic national tree, the camel-thorn, is called *Acacia erioloba*, and we can recognise it by the shape of its leaves, bark, thorns, inflorescence, flowers, fruit (pods), roots, tree size and growth form, its genes, and we also know it from its wood, where it grows, when it flowers and fruits, and partly also by who lives in and on it, as well its various uses. Camel-thorn belongs to the genus *Acacia* because it has specific characters in common with the type species *Acacia nilotica*, first described by Linneaus in 1753. Namibia has 25 *Acacia* species, Africa 80. They have many uses.

It recently turned out that some 1000 Australian wattles do not share some key characteristics with *Acacia nilotica*. By scientific convention, these wattles should therefore be moved to another genus, *Racosperma*. However, Australian botanists felt this to be inconvenient and therefore successfully convinced the Committee for Spermatophyta, responsible for naming seed plants, that, instead, the genus *Acacia* be redefined so that wattles retain that name. African botanists were out-numbered and out-witted (though not for want of trying), and therefore African *Acacias* shall henceforth be *Vachellia* or *Senegalia*. The economic and cultural needs of a billion Africans yield to those of 20 million Australians.

*Zophosis moralesi* is wondering whether it matters that *Acacia* is lost from Africa as long as we still have our wonderful acacia (writ small) trees so iconic of our Namibian landscape. When last did you hug a tree? Do so now. Let's keep our trees.

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