

Acacia: do we want stability or total change?

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The nomenclatural fate of the name *Acacia* will continue to attract major controversy right up to the forthcoming Congress in Melbourne. Recently I concluded that a little lateral thinking taking us outside the normal nomenclatural practices was essential to produce a solution which would satisfy everyone and put an end to all the argument and acrimony. My proposal (Brummitt in *Taxon* 59: 1925–1926, 2010) would retain the name *Acacia* in use for all species of the genus in the broad sense wherever they occur, including both Africa and Australia, while still recognising that at least two different genera are involved. Species in both genera would bear the name *Acacia* and the relevant epithet, and when it were necessary to specify the segregate genus, this could be done by using the convention *Acacia* (*Vachellia*) or *Acacia* (*Racosperma*). It is interesting, therefore, to see another proposal appearing in this issue of *Taxon* (60: 913–914, 2011) adopting similar lateral thinking but resulting in a very different outcome if accepted. This latest proposal is by our respected Vice-Rapporteur, Nicholas Turland, and therefore commands serious consideration, but, in my view, would result in no species being called *Acacia* by a great majority of users. The larger and predominantly Australian genus would become known as *Austroacacia* while the smaller segregate predominating in Africa and the New World would become known as *Protoacacia*. This seems to me to be the complete antithesis of nomenclatural stability, which would suit nobody. Why should we not just apply the present rules and call them *Racosperma* and *Vachellia*?

My proposal included the segregate genus *Senegalia* which occurs in Africa in approximately equal numbers to *Vachellia*, but I offered the option of deleting this when the proposal comes up for discussion. Since *Senegalia* has been taken up extensively in the New World, there is a case for deleting it from my proposal, but equally it has scarcely been taken up in Africa and Asia and there is a case also for including it in the proposal. My proposal will be equally relevant whether *Senegalia* is included or not. I have no strong feelings.

I have been told that my solution will not receive broad support because it is associated in people's minds with my views on paraphyletic taxa. That would be absolutely wrong. In the three decades in which this controversy has raged, very few people have seriously argued against the recognition of at least three genera within the former broad genus *Acacia*. The splitting was proposed by a very experienced and competent taxonomist, Les Pedley (in *Bot. J. Linn. Soc.* 92: 219–254, 1986), based on morphological (if somewhat cryptic) characters, and was later confirmed by molecular analysis. I have never queried this, and my proposal does not make any assumption

that Pedley's taxonomy should not be accepted. The Turland proposal, on the other hand, allows that the whole complex may be called *Acacia* **only** if one does not accept the taxonomic splitting. And since virtually nobody disputes the splitting, virtually everyone will be obliged to take up *Protoacacia* and *Austroacacia*. The fact that nobody has to make any new combinations makes virtually no difference at all. Making new combinations is an activity that concerns only a few taxonomists. It is the names for the species that will be used by botanists, ecologists, applied botanists and many other users of plant names for the foreseeable future which will be critically important.

I believe the world is tired of the arguments, and we need to resolve this matter at Melbourne and not generate new controversies over which taxonomy we accept. More committees and papers in *Taxon* are not desirable. Under the Turland proposal, the names to be used will depend on whether the splitting of the broad genus is accepted or not. Users of plant names outside the taxonomic community will need to seriously assess the taxonomy—or, more likely, will opt to ignore that question in order to achieve the nomenclature they prefer. As we depart from Melbourne, there would be no agreement on whether the name *Acacia* should be used or not. I believe such arguments would be avoided if my proposal were accepted, since everybody would necessarily do the same thing.

My objective throughout this saga has been to achieve maximum possible stability of names. Although it goes outside normal practice, I am hopeful that my proposal will be accepted and the botanical world can resume normal good relations. The Turland proposal, I am afraid, would generate ongoing controversy. Acceptance of it would in practice amount to the changing of around 1400 names at a stroke for the many people accepting the generic splitting. As I have said before, users of names on both sides of the argument have said that they would find this unthinkable. Surely we do not want this. How will the 250 users of plant names in Australia and Asia who wrote to me before the Vienna Congress react if they are told they must change the names of all the species which mean so much to them? In my more than 40 years on nomenclatural committees, this would, I believe, be the most disruptive decision ever taken. While the willingness of the Vice Rapporteur to think outside the usual box is very commendable, his solution unfortunately would in my opinion be the worst possible outcome.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Nicholas Turland for discussion of our two proposals.