

CONSERVE OUR HERITAGE OF COMMON NAMES!

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I was delighted, as I am sure other readers of *African Wildlife* Vol. 38 No. 4 were, with Jeff Huntly's explanation of the origin of the name of the 'spekvreter' - the friendly little bird that carries the rather plain English name of 'familiar chat'. His article comes at a time when the authors of a variety of coffee-table books and reference works on South African flora and fauna show scant regard for traditional South African names. Not only are some of these authors fabricating an English alternative when only an Afrikaans or scientific name exists, but they compound the felony on occasion by translating an Afrikaans name that is in accepted usage by both English- and Afrikaans-speaking naturalists.

Common names are a problem the world over, I will admit, varying as they do from country to country and district to district. For example, the fighting fish called the 'leervis' in the Eastern Cape is the 'garrick' of Natal; the 'spekvreter' Mr Huntly wrote about I have known only as a 'dagbreekie' since my childhood in Grahamstown; the 'button spider' of southern Africa is the 'black widow' of the Americas. There are dozens of others that could be quoted.

But who allows authors to translate descriptive names like 'spekbos' into 'bacon bush', or produce ghastly hybrids like 'Buck Bay vygie'? Seed-merchants and their customers are content with 'Bokbaaivygie' - so why translate it? The botanists are

the greatest offenders - their *magnum opus* being the translation of 'kershout' into 'candlewood' for the tree *Pterocelastrus tricuspidatus*. In modern Afrikaans *kers* does indeed mean candle, but the trekboers who named this tree spoke a language in which *kers* means cherry. So a more correct translation, if one is necessary at all, would be 'cherrywood'.

Another howler is 'farmer's bean' - the anglicised apology for 'boerboon' (one of several trees of the genus *Schotia*). Correct use of an Afrikaans dictionary will reveal the early Boer's intentions: the large seeds of these trees are reminiscent of the domestic broad-bean (= *boerboon* in Afrikaans). I see some authors have avoided this pitfall by calling one species in this genus the 'tree fuchsia'.

Other traditional names like 'klipspringer' and 'bontebok' remain intact, probably too entrenched in the vocabulary of the trophy hunter to be tampered with. But these name-coiners are fearless! When propriety forbids translations of earthy names like 'perdepis' (a tree) and 'witgatspreeu'¹ (a bird), they give us genteel equivalents like 'horsewood' and 'pied starling' respectively. And no doubt ethnic considerations have developed the name 'coral tree' for the 'kaffirboom' (or 'kafferboom') (*Erythrina* spp.) we all grew up with.

Who decides on these alternatives when translations are not possible? Even the ornithologists have yielded to the temptation. While they recognize the beautiful onomatopoeia in names like 'bokmakierie' and 'boubou shrike', who among them had the temerity to discard 'piet-my-vrou' in favour of the plodding, encyclopaedic 'red-chested cuckoo'? And who among the herpetologists allowed one author to call the 'rinkhals' the 'ringnecked spitting cobra'? 'Rinkhals' is already the accepted English name arrived at directly from Afrikaans and ultimately from the Dutch *ring* (= ring) and *hals* (= neck).

Then there are the name-coiners who disregard the need to communicate verbally. If a name is to stand the test of time one should be able to repeat it five times over without getting tongue-tied. Take the buff-spotted flufftail for instance. This is a very rare bird and no doubt its rarity has allowed the name to survive in bird books for decades. But if I saw one at the bottom of my garden I would never admit it to anyone. All I can manage is fluff-botted sufftail in the privacy of my own home.

¹ See the note at the end of this article.

There are also the pedantic/exotic names that no thinking South African should abide. Who would dare to use the term 'hyrax' in the Magaliesberg when he is talking of a dassie? Who but a brave man would risk the peace of a Karoo dorp by calling a 'meerkat' a 'suricate'? Why force 'caracal' on a Capetonian whose forefathers have been talking of 'lynx' or 'rooikat' for centuries?

If a name-changer is bent on novelty I would suggest he turns to the Bantu names for light relief - some of these are picturesque, others hilariously apt. Take for example the bird with the infectious and raucous cackle which the Xhosa call *intlekibafazi* ('laughing wives'); the Afrikaners are content with 'kakelaar' but the stiff upper lip of the English allowed only 'red-billed hoopoe'. The bizarre litte tree called the 'small knobwood' (*Zanthoxylum capense*) has wide scope too. Extracting its local name from a Transkeian citizen is difficult - averted eyes or a fit of embarrassed giggling are the usual response, but perseverance will bring *uMlungumabele* to light. A rudimentary knowledge of Xhosa plus the experience of having fallen or brushed against the sharp bumps of this tree will leave one in no doubt about the humour and ridicule of the name.

Through the medium of your magazine I would like to blow the whistle on the present situation. Name-coiners and name-translators must cease their activities forthwith! I appeal to publishers to regard future name changes with the suspicion they deserve, and I ask practitioners in every branch of the natural sciences to keep a vigilant eye on the authors of popular field-guides and coffee-table books. While we are at pains to preserve the natural heritage of our flora and fauna, let us preserve also what remains of the heritage of our common names.

NOTE

1, The Editor of *African Wildlife* comments:

For the benefit of our overseas readers, genteel translations of *perdepis* and *witgatspreeu* would be 'horse urine' and 'white-bottomed starling' respectively. Curiously enough, although the recent adoption of the name 'coral tree' for 'kaffirboom' is a commendable attempt to remove the now-derogatory word 'kaffir' from the South African vocabulary, the name 'coral tree' actually has a long pedigree of its own.

The coral trees or kaffirbooms belong to the genus *Erythrina* which has a world-wide distribution. The first *Erythrina* species to be described was named *E. corallodendron* by Linnaeus in 1754. It comes from the West Indies and has been cultivated in South Africa for many years. 'Corallodendron' translates as 'coral tree' and this name is often used for the West Indian and other *Erythrina* species. The botanist Johann Auge (1711-1805) used the name 'coral tree' for *Erythrina* in the Cape Town Garden although 'kafferboom' was probably the name used at that time in the country districts as noted by the Swedish botanist Thunberg in 1772. 'Kafferboom' (Afrikaans) and 'kaffirboom' (English) prevailed over 'coral tree' in South Africa until recently.