

The mysterious boab



A back street curves around a boab tree in Derby.

Certain trees are closely linked with specific regions. Think redwoods—think California. Then there are the maples of Canada, the oaks of England and the eucalypts of Australia. The boabs (or baobabs) have a rather mysterious connection with several areas. Varieties of boab trees are found in Africa, Madagascar and Australia.

Boabs are often called bottle trees because they have swollen trunks that look like long, thin bottles, or like champagne bottles with a big, round base. Fully grown trees are much taller than the other vegetation in the surrounding scrubland, called savannah. In Australia, local people call the boab the calendar plant. When its large, fragrant, white flowers start blooming it means that the monsoon season is near. The monsoons are seasonal winds originating in the Indian Ocean and southern Asia. These winds are usually accompanied by heavy rains. Boabs know when the rains are due.

The Australian boab is found only in the rugged northwest of Australia, around the town of Derby. It is unlike any other plant in the region or any other tree in the whole of Australia. There are theories, and some evidence, that it somehow made its way across the Indian Ocean to Australia.

Because the trees are protected in the town of Derby they can be found in some odd places. They are not removed from streets. Often

and unexpectedly they are at the centre of roundabouts in quiet back streets. Some streets curve around them.

If a boab grows on fence lines between houses it is not removed. The fence runs up to one side of the tree, stops and then starts again on the other side, several metres away. Since European settlement, bushfires have reduced the number of boabs in the open country.

The northwest of Australia is a land of flooding monsoon rains and cyclones for several months over summer (November to April). Humidity is high and temperatures are often above 40°C. Then come the dry months (May to October). Grasses and shrubs die off. The sandy loam turns to hot, red dust. Temperatures stay high (up to 35°C). Waterholes in rocky gorges are few and far between.

This is Kimberley boab territory. Think boab—think Kimberley. In the dry season boab branches are bare. In one Australian Aboriginal legend, the boab tree had misbehaved and was punished by being put in the ground upside down, roots in the air. In the wet season boabs are covered with rich green foliage.

Boabs are most likely the oldest living things on the Australian continent.

Photograph: A. Horsfield

