



## The correct genus spelling for the Australian foxtail palm is *Wodhyethia*

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### Abstract

The Australian endemic, monotypic palm genus *Wodyetia* was described in 1983 by the botanist Anthony (Tony) Irvine based on *W. bifurcata* A.K.Irvine. The native range of this spectacular palm, which is now widely grown in cultivation worldwide, is a very small area on the flanks of Thundiyamo (Mount Melville), Cape York Peninsula, Queensland. The genus name honours Wodhyethi (c. 1900–1979, aka Johnny Flinders), an elder of the Aba Yalgayi and Aba Yeerrkoyi clans of the people whose language may be referred to as Oko Wurriima ('Language of the Flinders Islands Area'). The palm is endemic to the country of the Aba Yeerrkoyi clan, which encompasses Othawa (Cape Melville). While it is welcome that Irvine chose to honour Wodhyethi, he adopted an incorrect spelling ('Wodyeti', hence '*Wodyetia*'), which, under Art. 60.1 of the *International Code of nomenclature for algae, fungi and plants*, is a correctable error. The correct spelling of the genus name is *Wodhyethia*.

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### Introduction

The spectacular Australian foxtail palm *Wodhyethia bifurcata* A.K.Irvine is endemic to a very small area on the southwest, south and southeast sides of the Melville Range inland from Cape Melville, Cape York, Queensland. The foxtail palm has become one of the world's most popular and desirable palms in cultivation, and is now planted widely. Seeds of foxtail palms became very highly sought after in the years between its formal

taxonomic description in 1983 and its establishment in cultivation, with the result that illegal collecting substantially compromised the wild population and damaged the area in which it occurs (Ricketts, 2014, Witty 2023). Illegal harvesting even led to allegations of government corruption following an affair known as the Cape Melville Incident ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cape\\_Melville\\_incident](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cape_Melville_incident)), possibly contributing to the downfall of the Goss Labor government in Queensland in 1996.

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Irvine (1983), in describing the genus and its sole species, gave no formal etymology but noted the following in the paper's Introduction: "*The palm was not known as Wodyetia by these people [on whose land it grew]. Wodyeti ("wad-yeti") was their name clearly intended for Johnny Flinders, the last surviving, male Aboriginal with traditional knowledge of the area, who died in 1978 [sic] at about 78 years old. Wodyeti acted as an anthropological and linguistic informant for researchers such as Chase and Sutton. His people were persuaded to move from the area by the Queensland government and consequently their cultural association with the area lapsed*".

Wodhyethi (c. 1900–1979) was an Elder of the Aba Yeerkoyi and Aba Yalgayi clans, which were two of seven clans sharing the same language, Oko Wurriima. The clans with this language owned estates comprising collectively the lands and seas of the area named by Europeans as Cape Melville (Othawa), Bathurst Bay, Bathurst Heads (Alpirrmima) and the Flinders Islands Group (Wurriyi). These clans are collectively referred to as Yiithuwarra in the Guugu-Yimidhirr language of their distant southern neighbours. Yiithuwarra is an exonym (a term in a foreign language) which the descendants of the original members of the Oko Wurriima language group adopted for administrative purposes from Guugu-Yimidhirr, despite the two languages being mutually unintelligible. One of us (C.F.) is a Traditional Owner of Yiithuwarra Country and is a member of the same descent group as Wodhyethi.

Wodhyethi ('Stinging Vine' - possibly for *Tragia novae-hollandiae*) was also known as Orrpayin ('He Tells the Truth') and by the English name Johnny Flinders. He was born about 1900 in a cave at Ayamo, just south-west of Cape Melville, as was his father. His mother's mother's country was the area around Alpirrmima (Bathurst Heads). Wodhyethi grew up learning the traditional law and stories of his homeland, and went through the traditional tooth removal ceremony, part of initiation, as a youth. His main story was Itjibiya, one of the two brothers who speared the ancestral Whale whose body became Wakayi (Blackwood Island in the Flinders Group). His initiation was at Old Lockhart River Mission when he was a married man, probably during the 1920s.

As Johnny Flinders, Wodhyethi and his brother Diver worked first in the trochus, bêche-de-mer and pearling fisheries under European, Japanese and Torres Strait Islander captains, on the reefs of Queensland, New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and New Caledonia. He had two children, but both passed away before adulthood. After World War II Wodhyethi worked as a stockman in the North Queensland pastoral industry. In 1957, following a conflict with other station workers and a policeman, he and his wife were removed to Bwgcolman (pronounced "Burrroman"; Palm Island), a controlled settlement used to contain and isolate Indigenous people from throughout Queensland (and beyond) during the "Protection Era" from 1897 to at

least the 1970's (Queensland Government 2018). During this period, the lives of Indigenous people in Queensland were highly constrained. Wodhyethi's wife Hilda passed away on Palm Island in 1966, and he remained there until his death in 1979, tending her grave.

Wodhyethi, despite removal by administrative fiat to Palm Island, retained a deep connection with his Country. Between 1970 and 1978, he collaborated with one of us (P.S.), often very intensively, to record his vast knowledge of his Country and its traditions and language. He was the main source for the documentation by Chase & Sutton (1981) and Sutton (2016) of the languages, sites and traditions of the area between Bathurst Heads, the Flinders Group and Cape Melville.

Irvine's claim that the descendants' cultural association with the area 'lapsed' is incorrect. Despite a history of dispossession associated with European colonisation of Cape York Peninsula, many Indigenous peoples throughout the area retained connection with Country, even when highly attenuated. Traditional claimant rights in the Cape Melville and Flinders Islands areas were recognised by the Queensland Land Tribunal in 1994, with a native title claim to the area around Cape Melville by the Yiithuwarra people scheduled for determination in late 2024.

In response to correspondence from Irvine, P.S. proposed that the foxtail palm be named in honour of Wodhyethi, given that it grows only on the Country of Wodhyethi and his people. (While local names for several palms were recorded during P.S.'s linguistic studies, no specimens were vouchered and it was not possible to provide an accurate Oko Wurriima name for the foxtail palm.) The correct spelling, Wodhyethi, was provided to Irvine by P.S. in this correspondence, and was the only spelling used by P.S. at the time and subsequently.

Despite being provided with the linguistically correct orthography, Irvine chose to simplify the spelling of Wodhyethi's name, representing it as 'Wodyeti' ("wad-yeti"), presumably to make it more tractable for European language speakers. In doing so, however, he misrepresented Wodhyethi's name. The lamino-interdental stops /dh/ and /th/ in Oko Wurriima are phonemically very different from the apico-alveolar stops /d/ and /t/, and the two should never be conflated, as they are by Irvine. As an example, the verbs monda (to put on, as clothes) and mondha (to weep) differ only in the /d/dh/ consonants, but are unrelated words.

The correct spelling, *Wodhyethia*, was used by Johnston & Lacey (1984) in a botanical paper published one year after Irvine published the genus, in effect recognising that Irvine's '*Wodyetia*' was orthographically incorrect. Wodhyethi's name has also been spelled correctly in Layton (1992), Anon (1994), and Haviland (1999). Irvine's spelling has never been used except by him (or in works that have sourced it from him).

We acknowledge that any spelling of Wodhyethi's name is a transcription of an oral, non-written language. While there are ISO standards for the transliteration into Latin characters of many written languages that use non-Latin scripts (such as Greek, Cyrillic, Japanese etc.), the transcription of non-written languages is a different matter. Such transcriptions follow the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). However, as the IPA technical scripts are inconvenient for general publishing and educational purposes, linguists often employ instead what are called practical orthographies. These are adequate to represent many non-European phonemes using the Latin alphabet, and to accurately discriminate phonemes that, while distinct, may appear similar to European speakers, such as /d/t/ and /dh/th/. Irvine's rendering and suggested pronunciation ('wad-yeti') does not follow these standards, effectively rendering the word meaningless in Oko Wurriima.

It was unusual and welcome at that time to honour Wodhyethi in the genus name of this spectacular palm. Indeed, *Wodhyethia* remains to this day the only eponymous Australian genus name honouring an Indigenous person (see Nash 2014, 2024). However, spelling an honorific eponym correctly is clearly important for the honour to be adequate. A linguistic simplification of a European eponym would be considered unacceptable, and it is equally unacceptable in this case.

Art. 60.1 of the *International Code of Nomenclature for algae fungi and plants* (Turland *et al.* 2018) provides for the correction of typographical or orthographical errors, with a pertinent example given in Art. 60.1 Ex. 7. The generic name *Nilssonia* Brongn. was proposed for conservation by Wang (2011) over the misspelt '*Nilsonia*' (named in honour of Sven Nilsson but consistently misspelt in its protologue by Brongniart, 1825). While the Nomenclature Committee on Fossils (Herendeen, 2015) recommended conservation, the General Committee determined (Wilson 2016) that conservation was unnecessary because '*Nilsonia*' is correctable under Art. 60.1 to *Nilssonia*.

In the same manner, the spelling '*Wodyetia*' is clearly orthographically incorrect for a genus named after Wodhyethi. Accordingly, the correct spelling for the foxtail palm is *Wodhyethia bifurcata* A.K.Irvine.

Note that Art. 60.9 of the *Code* does not apply in this case. There is no standard Latinisation of Wodhyethi's name, and no indication that Irvine was attempting an intentional Latinisation.

Art. 60.3 encourages a degree of reserve when correcting a name, especially if the change affects the first letter or first syllable (which this change does not). While we acknowledge that adopting the correct spelling *Wodhyethia* will entail some disruption, particularly in the horticultural trade and its literature given that the foxtail palm is widely cultivated and popular, we nevertheless regard that a strict application of the *Code* makes

this change both necessary and correct. Given the overall similarity between '*Wodyetia*' and *Wodhyethia* (to non-linguists), it will be clear to users what plant is being referred to while the change is adopted over time. Likewise, the popular and horticulturally important Western Australian genus *Lechenaultia* was incorrectly spelled '*Leschenaultia*' between 1837 and the 1950s, when it successfully reverted to the correct spelling (Morrison 1986) with minimal confusion.

Concerning pronunciation, the lamino-interdental stops /dh/ and /th/ are formed by placing the tip of the tongue between the teeth and the blade of the tongue on the roof of the mouth, unlike the apico-alveolar /d/ and /t/ where the tip of the tongue is placed just behind the teeth and the blade does not contact the mouth roof. While lamino-interdental consonants are common in Australian Indigenous languages, they have no close analogues in European languages, and Western palates are unlikely to be able to form them correctly. The closest spoken approximation is acceptable.

Finally, we believe that this case provides a cautionary tale when using Australian Indigenous words and names in taxonomy. Taxonomists are rarely also experienced linguists, and the likelihood of linguistic error is as high as if a linguist with little experience of taxonomy tried naming new species. As well as ensuring that the words used are culturally appropriate, and seeking permission wherever possible from the relevant Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander individuals or groups, taxonomists should consult with linguists to ensure that spellings are as standard and correct as possible, rather than taking a 'best guess' approach or deliberately aiming for a solution most acceptable to European language-speakers, as Irvine appears to have done.

## Disclosures

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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