BAOBAB HEALTH SURVEY IN BOTSWANA AND NAMIBIA

Prepared by: Elsie de Meyer (Ph.D. candidate studying the health of Baobabs)

Baobabs are amongst the most recognisable and well loved of all trees. They play an important role in the lives of many subsistence farmers and were used as source of food and water by the earliest travellers through Africa. Despite their prominence and importance, very little is known regarding diseases that affect the health of baobabs. In recent years, there have been a number of reports of baobab mortality in various parts of southern Africa**.** In most cases, the cause of these deaths has been unknown. Part of my Ph.D. project is to determine the causal agents of diseases of baobab trees.

We were recently distressed to learn that "Grootboom" (big tree) in Namibia, one of the largest recorded baobab trees known, died alongside two of its neighbours in 2004. We, therefore, decided to pay a visit to this site and to consider the health status of other trees in Botswana and Namibia. In this regard, our aim was to collect samples from healthy as well as diseased trees and then to compare the fungi isolated from these trees. The trip also afforded us the opportunity of collecting samples from *Terminalia* trees for another Centre of Excellence project.

On this survey trip, I was accompanied by Draginja Pavlic and Magriet van der Nest. We left Pretoria on the morning of 24 September with a plan to be away for 18 days in Botswana and Namibia. We were fortunate to be accompanied by Dr. Diana Mayne, who is currently writing a book on baobabs. Diana has travelled to various parts of the world, looking for interesting and historically famous baobabs. This meant that we were in the fortunate position of having close access to a wealth of enthusiasm, energy, experience and knowledge regarding baobabs.

We drove north from Pretoria, entering Botswana at the Stockpoort border post. Some of the sites in Botswana that we visited included Chapman's (Fig. 1) and Green's baobabs close to Gweta and Baines' baobabs at Nxai pan, where we also camped for one night (Fig. 2). We then went in search of another historical tree close to Lake Nagami, but after a day of driving around and doing considerable "bundu-bashing", we had become much more knowledgeable about the area. Firstly, we learned not to ask young people about old things like trees. Secondly, roads are not always where maps suggest they might be, especially where the mapping has been done more than 40 years previously. We also discovered that the tree we were seeking had died in 1966 - we were 40 years too late!

In Namibia we found many diseased baobab trees close to where "Grootboom" had died and we also paid a visit to the nearby "Holboom" (hollow tree) (Fig. 3). We also found that another famous tree, the "Dorslandboom", appears to be dying. One of its stems is already dead and others are in advanced stages of decay.

The sighting of the "baobab forest" south of Opuwo in the Joubert Mountains was definitely one of the highlights of the trip. These trees have the most bizarre shapes (Fig. 4) and appear to be the most southern stand of baobab trees in Africa. Another highlight was a visit to Epupa Falls on the Kunene River. Here the baobab trees grow on the rocks right next to the falls, which is a truly beautiful sight (Fig. 5).

The babobab health survey in Botswana and Nambia was long and not always easy. But we had a most interesting, enjoyable, successful and safe trip. We collected many samples that will serve our research well and we also accumulated substantial data, while travelling through some really spectacular countryside.

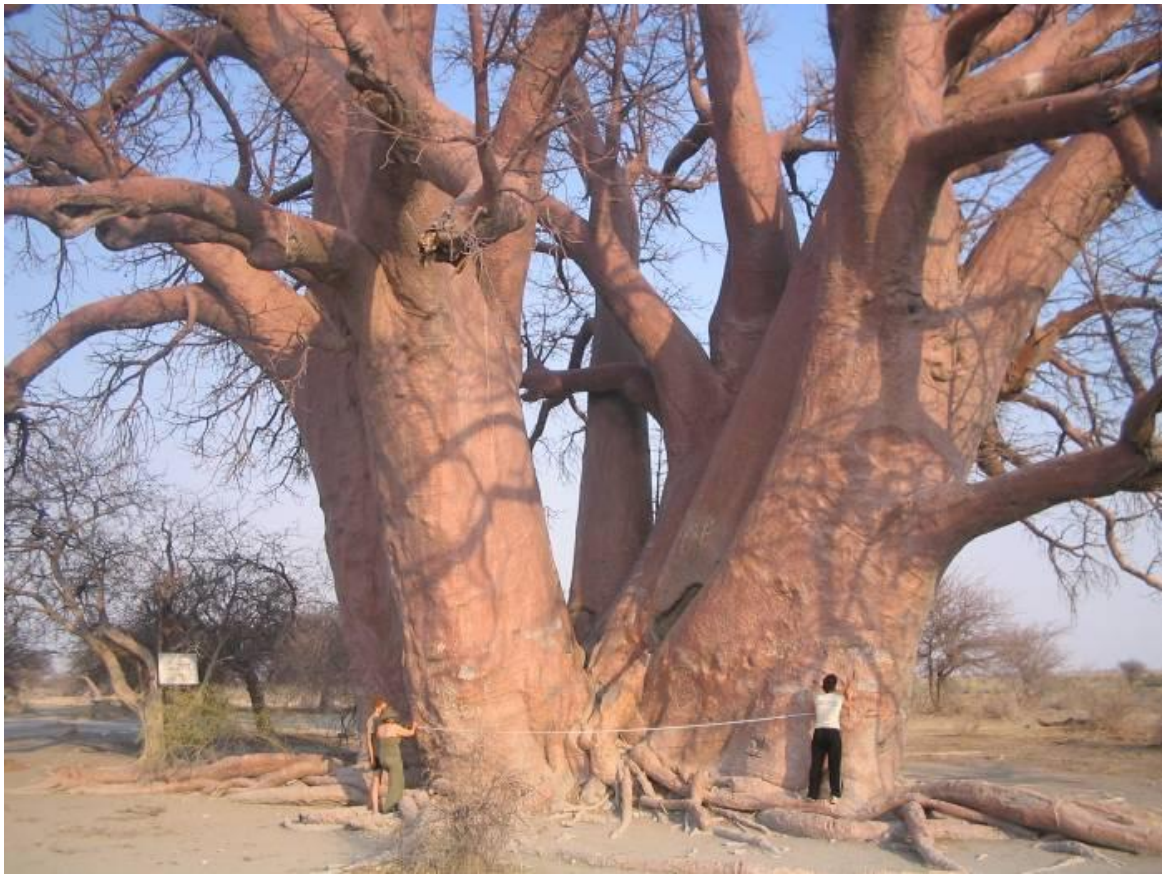

Fig. 1 Diana, Magriet and Elsie measuring the girth of Chapman's baobab

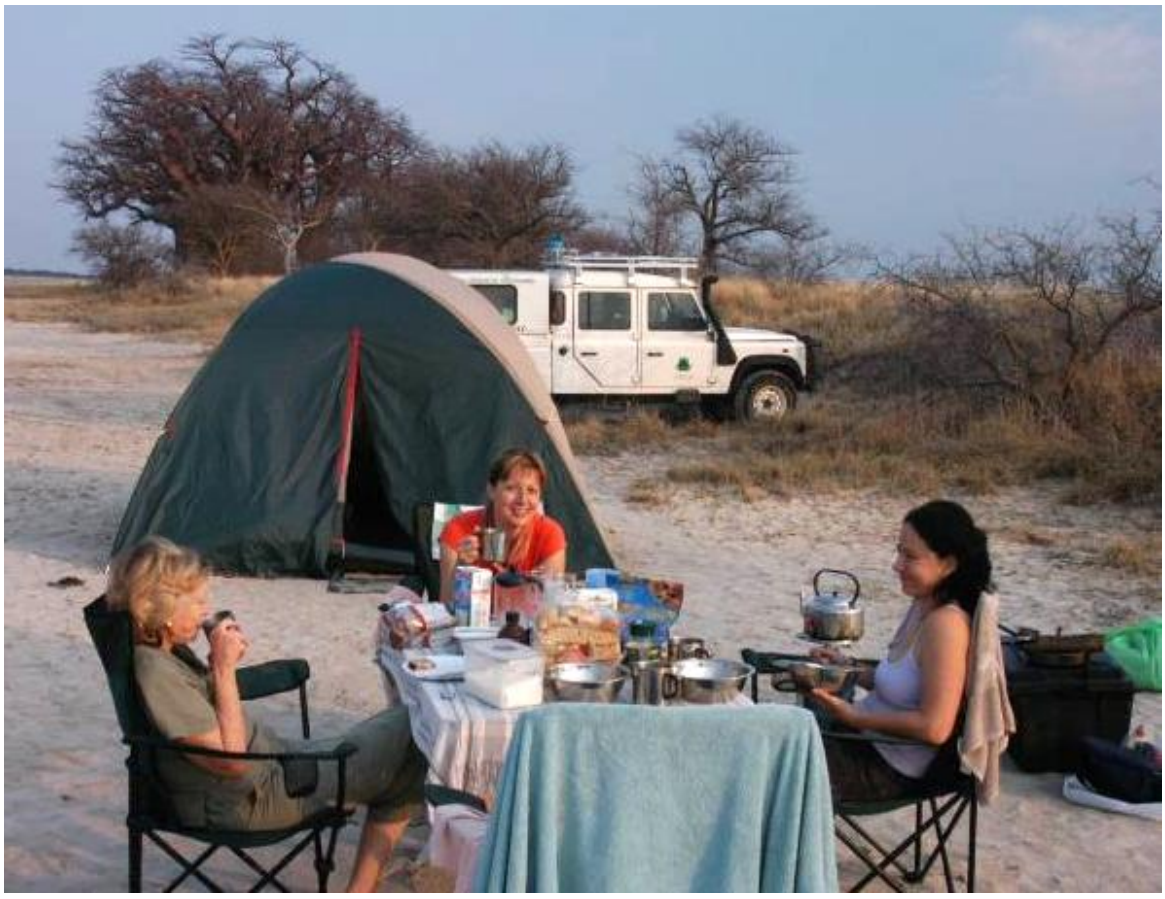

Fig. 2 Diana, Draginja & Magriet having breakfast at Baines' baobabs

Fig. 3 Holboom close to Tsumkwe in Namibia

Fig. 4 Baobabs in the Joubert Mountains close to Opuwo

Fig. 5 Baobabs growing on the rocks at Epupa falls, Namibia.