

PROPOSALS TO CONSERVE OR REJECT

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(1601) Proposal to reject the name *Agave noah* (Agavaceae)

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(1601) *Agave noah* Nickels, Catalogue: 26. 1894 (?)
[*Monocot: Agav.*], *nom. utique rej. prop.*
Typus: non designatus.

The American genus *Agave* has more than 200 species mainly distributed in tropics and deserts of North America, with the majority in Mexico. Many species are in cultivation throughout the world. Since prehistoric times man has made use of agaves as a source of food, drink, fiber and construction materials. Some species are cultivated on large scales and used in world trade for fibers (sisal, henequen), alcoholic beverages (tequila, mescal, pulque) and as ornament (Gentry, *Agaves of Continental North America*, Univ. Ariz. Press, Tucson. 1982).

The taxonomy of the genus is difficult and confusing due to the proliferation of names of species described using horticultural specimens. The nomenclature is particularly abundant for species with wide distribution and variation. Many of these horticultural forms have been reduced to synonyms of species (Gentry, l.c.).

One plant with a confusing taxonomic history is *Agave noah*, which was named by Anna B. Nickels from plants collected in northern Mexico. It was listed in her *Catalogue and price list of Cactuses and other Texan and Mexican plants* and described as “The true century plant, which only blooms once in a 100 years. The leaves of this plant are of a pale ashy green color, are very wide and short, also very much turned up at the sides”. (Cat.: 26. 1894). However, there was no type designated and no other description was provided.

The first citation of the name in subsequent taxonomic literature was made by Trelease (in *Ann. Rep. Missouri Bot. Gard.* 22: 85–97. 1911) who included *A. noah* Nickels as a synonym for *A. wislizeni* Engelm. in his revision of the group *Applanatae*, with the observation: “Specimens [of *A. wislizeni*] which are still small occur in the living collections of the Missouri Botanical

Garden, recorded as from Engelmann, and from these it is impossible to distinguish other specimens distributed from Lampazos, Nuevo León, by Mrs. Anna B. Nickels, under the name *A. noah*”.

Gentry (in *Cact. Succ. J.* (Los Angeles) 47: 104. 1975), although indicating that *A. wislizeni* was published by Engelmann (in *Trans. Acad. Sci. St. Louis* 3(20): 320. 1875) as an intended substitute name for *A. scabra* Salm-Dyck (in *Bonplandia* 7: 89. 1859), nevertheless accepted both *A. wislizeni* and *A. scabra* as distinct species, mentioning “the horticultural name *Agave noah*, as listed by Mrs. Nickels in her catalogue” in a note under *A. wislizeni*. Gentry later (l.c.: 259.) corrected his usage of *A. wislizeni*, which he then treated as superfluous and illegitimate, and accepted his previous synonym *A. parrasana* Berger (in *Notizbl. Königl. Bot. Gart. Berlin* 4: 250. 1906) for the species involved. However, Ullrich (in *Sida* 15: 241–261. 1992) correctly points out that since *A. scabra* Salm-Dyck (1859) is itself an illegitimate later homonym of *A. scabra* Ortega (1797), *A. wislizeni* cannot be superfluous. But Ullrich differs from Gentry and lists both *A. wislizeni* and *A. noah* not with the narrow endemic *A. parrasana* but as synonyms of the more widespread *A. parryi* Engelm. (l.c.: 311), a name of equivalent priority to *A. wislizeni*, although acknowledging that “the exact position of *A. wislizeni* cannot be evaluated now because...the locality given by Engelmann could not be verified”.

So while the identity of *A. wislizeni* remains a mystery, that of *A. noah* can now potentially be clarified. Recent collections of agaves from the Sierra de Lampazos in Nuevo León have led to the description of *A. ovatifolia* Starr & Villarreal (in *Sida* 20: 495–499. 2002). This species was described from plants found in mesic forest of Sierra de Lampazos in northern Nuevo León, where locally called “noga”. The plants are of economic importance as forage and horticulturally desirable. These plants resemble the pictures of *A. wislizeni* appear-

ing in Trelease (l.c.: figs. 75–79), some of which (figs. 78, 79) may represent authentic material of *A. noah*, although his description of *A. wislizeni* does not correspond with the description of *A. ovatifolia*. In addition, while *A. ovatifolia* has larger tepals (20 mm), flowers (67–74 mm), and leaves (35–45 × 20–24 cm), the *A. wislizeni* type specimen has shorter tepals (10–14 mm), flowers (56–60 mm) and leaves (30 × 15 cm). Morphologically and distributionally *A. ovatifolia* fits neatly between *A. havardiana* Trel. and *A. parrasana* of section *Parryanae*.

Although *A. noah* has always been relegated to synonymy or dismissed as a nomen nudum/subnudum, the brief description that was provided by Nickels will be interpreted by some to meet the requirements for valid publication under Art. 32 of the ICBN (Greuter & al., *Regnum Veg.* 138. 2000). The problem status of such “nomina subnuda” has been recently discussed by Brummitt (in *Taxon* 51: 171–174. 2002). Since an insufficient description was provided, no known type material exists, and the name appears to be a misrepresentation of the local name “noga” in a publication with commercial purposes, we propose here to reject the name *A. noah* under Art. 56 and allow continued use of the new name *Agave ovatifolia*.

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