

Foreword

I feel very honoured to have been asked by Christopher Willis, chief organiser of the SABONET Nyika Plateau Expedition in 2000, to provide a foreword for *Plants of the Nyika Plateau*. This book will be a valuable reference work for biodiversity managers, planners, academics, researchers, decision-makers, NGOs, and local communities.

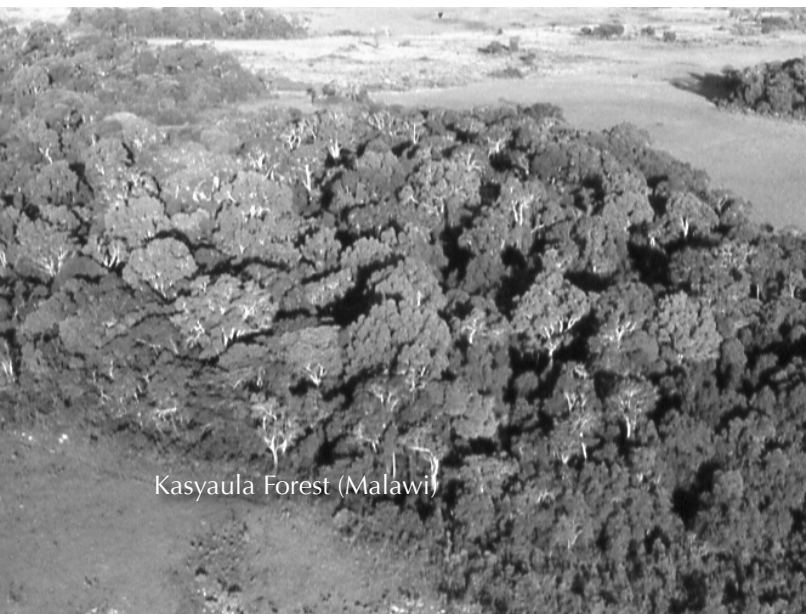
The Nyika Plateau is a unique ecosystem for the survival of old plants and birth of new ones. Over millennia, the mixture of both old and new plant species has resulted in unique plant diversity, making the Nyika Plateau one of the world's hotspots or important plant areas. A new visitor to Nyika is always greeted on the main plateau by the beauty of the rolling grasslands with dotted outcrops of varied forests, hills, and mountaintops. Of course to the tourist, this is just another place for recreation, while the local people regard the Nyika Plateau as a source of clean water and valuable non-timber products; but to the biologist, that beauty, both at species and habitat level, becomes a big attraction for scientific inquiry. Thus, the rich plant diversity of the Nyika Plateau has been a subject of research for botanists over the years, and the SABONET Nyika Plateau Expedition and its resultant publication are commendable developments that will improve our knowledge about the plants of the Nyika Plateau.

The SABONET Nyika Plateau Expedition was one of the main capacity-building activities of the SABONET project; a similar collecting expedition was undertaken to southern Mozambique in 2001. The expedition was notable since it was organised from within the sub-region, and was attended by 24 participants from six countries in southern and eastern Africa (Malawi: 7, Mozambique: 1, South Africa: 9, Zambia: 4, Zimbabwe: 2 and Tanzania: 1). The participation of both veteran and young botanists from the region enriched the expedition and made it unique. The collection of 3,343 plant specimens is a remarkable achievement. The description of one new species, many new plant distribution records, and the identification of several rare species are indications of the international botanical importance of the Nyika Plateau. I have no doubt that the Nyika Plateau provided a natural theatre and laboratory where veteran botanists such as Augustine Salubeni, Hassam Patel, Leonard Mwasumbi, John Burrows, and Patrick Phiri, amongst others, taught their young colleagues many aspects of field botany and plant taxonomy, including collection techniques, field identifications, character recognition of major plant groups, Nyika Plateau endemics, and rare plants. The great plant diversity of the Nyika Plateau must indeed have re-affirmed and demonstrated once again to the expedition members the concept of a "hotspot". In addition, the Nyika Plateau must have shown the unique distribution patterns of some plants, such as the pencil cedar, whose disjunct southern distribution appears to end at the Plateau.

The botanical survey of many developing countries remains poor mainly owing to lack of financial resources for fieldwork. This insufficient knowledge about the botany of our plants will impede the implementation of international obligations (such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, Wetland Convention—RAMSAR, and Millennium Development Goals) that aim to assist our governments to achieve sustainable development. However, for the ten southern African countries, the GEF/UNDP and USAID/IUCN ROSA funding of the SABONET project has meant enhancement of scientific and technical co-operation on plant diversity. In particular, building a team of experts from the region to collect, identify, document, and publish *Plants of the Nyika Plateau* shows that, given adequate funding, Africa has the human capacity to document every plant in our respective countries. Certainly, the Nyika Plateau team should not rest, but use the Nyika Plateau experience to penetrate and botanise other important under-collected habitats in our sub-region. They should form a long-lasting human network on which the region will rely for solving botanical and taxonomic problems at both the national and regional level.

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