

*Parkia*

*Leguminosae*

[*Fabaceae/Mimosaceae*]

*Parkia* commemorates a Scottish explorer and physician, Mungo Park (1771-1806) who, while serving as an assistant surgeon for the British East India Company on board HMS *Worcester* had the opportunity to visit Sumatra. He discovered eight new fish there and when he returned to Scotland contributed an academic paper on them to The Linnean Society. In 1790 under the aegis of The African Association Major Daniel Houghton (1740-1791) had explored in western Africa travelling east from The Gambia in search of not only the course of the Niger River but also Timbuktu that was believed to lie on it. However, in 1791, having crossed Senegal he disappeared in the Sahara Desert. In 1794 Park now applied to the Association to further Houghton's mission and he set out the following year. Initially he followed in Houghton's footsteps but was delayed when he was imprisoned for four months by a Moorish chief from which he eventually escaped. He continued his search and reached the Niger River in July 1796 at Ségou. He then explored it as far as Bamako (about 300 of the River's 2,500 miles). In 1797 he returned to Scotland (having been given up for dead) and described his journey in *Travels in the Interior of Africa* published in 1799. He was back in Africa leading a large expedition (local guides, some slaves and about 43 Europeans) in 1805 at the behest of the British Government, this time to follow the Niger river to its mouth. Only 11 Europeans (depleted by fever and dysentery) reached the Niger in August 1805 and then retraced Park's previous journey, this time downstream. By November they came to the unexplored River and had been reduced to 5 Europeans and only 1 guide with 3 slaves. Before starting out on this new stretch, with the intention of reaching the River's mouth in the January, Park sent letters home to the Colonial Office and to his wife via a second guide. It was discovered later that the small group covered about 1000 miles of the 'new' River, passing Timbuktu early on and warding off ever increasing local opposition to their progress along the way until they reached the Bussa Rapids in north-western Nigeria (where the southern end of the Kainji Reservoir stands today). Here they were attacked yet again and it is suspected the remaining Europeans were drowned trying to escape when their boat became stranded on a rock. One slave survived to tell the tale. In 1827 Park's second son Thomas travelled to West Africa to check that his father had not been imprisoned again but he died of fever before making much impression on his intended journey. Today The Royal Scottish Geographical Society awards a Mungo Park Medal for outstanding contributions to geographical knowledge from exploration or research and for practical work, under hazardous conditions, to the benefit of humanity. Selkirk in Scotland boasts a monument built in 1859 in memory of Park and a memorial stone also rests in the Old Graveyard in Galashiels.

Members of this family absorb nitrogen from the air. Through the bacterial nodules on their deep growing roots they will introduce nitrogen to the soil (and aerate it) to the benefit of neighbouring plants and any following them in the same soil.