

UC Riverside researcher names lichen after President Barack Obama

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This is *Caloplaca obamae* growing on Pleistocene soils on Santa Rosa Island.
Credit: J. C. Lendemer.

A researcher at UC Riverside has discovered a new species of lichen - a plant-like growth that looks like moss or a dry leaf - and named it after President Barack Obama.

"I discovered the new species in 2007 while doing a survey for lichen diversity on Santa Rosa Island in California," said Kerry Knudsen, the lichen curator in the [UCR Herbarium](#). "I named it *Caloplaca obamae* to show my appreciation for the president's support of science and [science education](#)."

Knudsen published his discovery in the March issue of the journal *Opuscula Philolichenum*.

"I made the final collections of *C. obamae* during the suspenseful final weeks of President Obama's campaign for the United States presidency, and this paper was written during the international jubilation over his election," Knudsen said. "Indeed, the final draft was completed on the very day of President Obama's inauguration."



This is *Caloplaca obamae* growing on Pleistocene soils on Santa Rosa Island. Credit: J. C. Lendemer.

C. obamae, the first species of any organism to be named in honor of President Obama, grows on soil and almost became extinct during the days of cattle ranching that spanned nearly a hundred years on Santa Rosa Island.

"This species barely survived the intensive grazing of cattle, elk and deer on Santa Rosa Island," Knudsen said. "But with cattle now removed, it has begun to recover. With future removal of elk and deer - both of which were introduced to the island - it is expected to fully recover."

Lichens, which grow slowly and live for many years, result from fungi and [algae](#) living together. They represent an important element of the [biodiversity](#) of life on public lands. There are approximately 17,000 species of lichen worldwide, with approximately 1,500 species reported from California. More than 300 lichens have been reported from Santa Rosa Island, almost as many species of [native plants](#) on the island.

Knudsen is excited about his discovery of *C. obamae*.

"A new lichen validates the value of the public support for preserving public lands as ecological sanctuaries," he said. "*C. obamae* teaches us that possibly other species of lichens and plants unique to Santa Rosa Island may have disappeared, without ever being known to science, since sheep ranching began there in the 1850s."

Knudsen, 58, has been working in the UCR Herbarium, a field research resource of the Department of Botany and Plant Sciences, since 2004. A retired construction worker, he volunteers his time in the herbarium, where he has built a collection of more than 10,000 lichens. Colleagues have named three new species of lichens after him.

He noted that he became interested in lichens when he grew bored after he retired from construction work in 2000.

"There are few lichen taxonomists in the United States and a few books on the lichen flora of North America, and none of these books are comprehensive," he said. "By studying lichens, I thought I could make a contribution to inventorying the fungal diversity of California, one of the world's biological hot-spots."

Knudsen, who has no academic degrees, has published more than 70 peer-reviewed research papers on lichens. He has described more than 25 species of lichens and lichenicolous (growing on lichens) fungi from

California, South America and Turkey.

Next in his research he plans to map and monitor the populations on Santa Rosa Island and study their recovery after the final removal of deer and elk.

Source: University of California - Riverside ([news](#) : [web](#))

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