Darwin meets Facebook

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Natural history plans to chart life on earth, yet the discipline risks being buried under a landslide of painstakingly collected data that isn't always used. Now researchers at London's Natural History Museum have created a social networking tool called 'Scratchpads' where natural historians can get together and share their data. A paper on this new platform features in a supplement on biodiversity informatics published today in the open access journal, *BMC Bioinformatics*.

Vincent Smith, Simon Rycroft, David Roberts and colleagues created the data-publishing framework for groups of people to create their own natural history-based social networks. Users create a virtual workbench to study aspects of an organism much as Darwin did during his lifetime, and anyone can get involved. To date the system serves over 1100 registered users across 100 sites, spanning academic, amateur and citizen-science audiences. Users have generated over 130,000 content nodes in the first two years.

The Scratchpads article is among nine articles chosen for publication in the BMC Bioinformatics supplement that highlight a range of recent advancements from general biodiversity information management to [DNA Barcoding](#). "Scratchpads is emblematic of the kinds of biodiversity informatics approaches that are being developed to help better meet the timeless and ever-growing challenges of biological data curation," says Neil Sarkar (editor of the BMC Bioinformatics [biodiversity](#) informatics supplement and Assistant Professor and Director of Biomedical Informatics at the University of Vermont in the USA).

The Scratchpads infrastructure combines databases, network protocols and computational services to bring people, information and computational tools together to perform and publish natural history. Specialist sites on fish, amphibians, trees and so on do exist. But natural history is known for its diverse approaches and researchers with widely differing views and contexts. Electronic data systems tend to offer just one way to represent data, which can alienate many potential contributors. In Scratchpads, the user-created workbenches mean that natural historians can gather, organise and share their data themselves, for example picking their own biological classification systems and incorporating data from other platforms such as Encyclopaedia of Life.

"Our goal was to build a system that could motivate individual researchers in the generation, management and dissemination of their own data for their own needs, while empowering a wider constituent of potential users who are free to repurpose this information for other uses," says Vincent Smith.

The researchers hope Scratchpads will prevent natural history data from being marginalized in the "electronic ghetto" of publishers' websites, or worse still never being published at all. Making better connections between these data also stands to boost natural history's image in the wider scientific community. The service may also provide a template for use in other disciplines too.

More information: The scratchpads social networking tool can be found here: scratchpads.eu/

Research article: Scratchpads: a data-publishing framework to build, share and manage information on the diversity of life, Vincent S Smith, Simon D Rycroft, Kehan T Harman, Ben Scott and David Roberts Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, London, SW7 5BD, UK, *BMC Bioinformatics* 2009, 10 (Suppl 14):S6;

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