

Reinventing the high court of organism names

December 5 2013, by Brendan M. Lynch

Ever since Carl Linnaeus founded the system for naming biological organisms in the 18th century —called binomial nomenclature, for the two Latin words used to describe species (e.g., *Homo sapiens*)—there have been causes for controversy among biologists, taxonomists and others who have named 1.5 million living things so far.

For instance, two scientists might discover the same organism separately from one another, and give it different [names](#); or a scientist might give a new name to an organism that already had been named; or a scientist might name an organism inappropriately.

For such cases and more, there is the International Commission for Zoological Nomenclature, which for more than a century has settled disputes in naming organisms and established rules to follow in naming new species.

Daphne Fautin, professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Kansas, is a commissioner with the ICZN.

"The commission is like the 'supreme court' for names of animals," Fautin said. "We also set the rules. We make a code, and those are the rules by which animals are named. We don't have to approve names—we just trust the community will follow the rules to maintain order. Only when there's a problem or a dispute in applying the rules do we get involved as a court."

One recent dispute involved the Giant Tortoise of Aldabra.

"It had been known by two names—one commonly used in science, but the other was older," Fautin said. "It turns out the legislation to protect the tortoise is all under the younger name, so we voted to invoke the younger name. Otherwise, we might have invalidated some of the legislation if we'd used the older name. That issue got a lot of comments, both pro and con."

Fautin, who also serves at KU as a curator with the Biodiversity Institute, is one of 26 ICZN commissioners—all of whom are senior scientists from around the world with expertise in different animal groups.

As a current vice president, she's recently helped to give the commission new life after the bankruptcy of its former sponsor threatened to put an end to the group's 118-year history.

For the next three years, National University of Singapore has agreed to host the coordinating part of the commission's secretariat, while the Natural History Museum in London will employ the editor of the commission's primary publication, *The Bulletin of Zoological Nomenclature*.

In the meantime, Fautin said the group would work to put its financial house in order for the future.

"There hasn't really been a good business model," said the KU researcher. "This buys us some time and allows us to operate while we look for a way to move forward."

For now, the commission's work of policing species names continues. In late November, the group met in Singapore to address pressing issues of nomenclature and the business of the group itself, hoping to modernize

its rules and practices.

"One of the recent instances is electronic publications," Fautin said. "We just issued an amendment making electronic publication of names legal, but there are some conditions. You can't just publish it like it's on paper. The names have to be registered first on our official registry. We're trying to keep up with the times and realities that people are publishing electronically, but we know that electronic records are ephemeral compared to journals to which libraries subscribe. We were concerned that electronic journals just could disappear."

Fautin, known internationally as a pre-eminent expert on sea anemones, has discovered, described and named a plethora of [new species](#) herself—so she has a vested interest in the rules governing scientific names.

"You can name a species after whatever you want," she said. "You're not supposed to name something after yourself—that's the only prohibition. And you shouldn't give vulgar names to things, although Carl Linnaeus himself was famous for that."

Provided by University of Kansas

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