Call to restore Indigenous names for plants and animals

October 23 2020

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Indigenous names for plants and animals should be restored within the scientific naming system according to AUT's Professor Len Gillman and University of Auckland's Dr Shane Wright. Their proposal was

published today in *Communications Biology*.

"European colonists once claimed land by proclamation and, in a similar manner, scientists depose indigenous names for plants and animals with publications in scientific journals," said Professor Gillman.

"It is now time for the rules governing scientific naming to be changed so that indigenous names can be restored," he said.

Under Gillman and Wright's proposal the scientific names for species such kauri would change from Agathis australis to Agathis kauri: restoring the indigenous name that has existed in Aotearoa, New Zealand for centuries. The North American edible deciduous forest tree, Diospyros virginiana would incorporate the Indigenous name and become Diospyros pessamin.

Shakespeare questioned the importance of names when he said: "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." However, Gillman and Wright contend that names are important.

"Names embody history, a sense of place and a right to belong," Gillman said. "The change we propose would herald an important step in the affirmation of Indigenous People's contribution to knowledge and establish a new respect for indigenous naming and understanding of plant and animal species.

"The almost ubiquitous chronological precedence of indigenous names has no standing or priority under current taxonomic codes, despite these names often conveying in-depth knowledge relating to form, uses, distribution and ecology. It is time for a new taxonomic order reflecting a respect for the knowledge and understanding of nature by Indigenous Peoples all over the world," said Gillman.

"Frequently many disparate species may be given the same epithet. For example, colensoi applies to at least 19 plant species, two bird species and two fungi in New Zealand," said Dr Shane Wright. "This penchant of naming organisms to honor collectors, sponsors, colleagues or employers could be described as 'colonial'. The names bestowed on organisms have in some cases been insensitive to place and historical circumstance, and convey no morphological or ecological information. Instead they recall outdated thinking that seems rather odd in a more pluralistic contemporary setting."

Gillman and Wright are hoping to stimulate a general debate on the merits of this approach, which must include indigenous peoples and scholars, before a formal rule proposal change can be submitted to the International Code of Nomenclature.

More information: Len Norman Gillman et al. Restoring indigenous names in taxonomy, *Communications Biology* (2020). DOI: 10.1038/s42003-020-01344-y

Provided by AUT University

Citation: Call to restore Indigenous names for plants and animals (2020, October 23) retrieved 24 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2020-10-indigenous-animals.html

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