

What's in a species name?

Raymond Hoser

Last year (1999) I was sitting in the AHS 50th anniversary conference in Sydney hearing Dr. Hal Cogger give a talk about scientific names of reptiles.

He kept asking the rhetorical question 'Think of the person behind the name'.

He was referring to people like Lesueur, Krefft, Storr and others who played key roles in describing many of Australia's reptile species.

Species such as *Oedura lesueurii*, *Varanus storri* and *Cacophis krefftii* were named after these herpetological greats.

It is traditional that species are sometimes named in honour of the good work done by people.

In more recent times I've done this myself. Take for example the species *Pailsus pailsei*, *Acanthophis wellsei* and the like. People were immortally honoured for their contributions to science.

Then there are the species named after people who've made major contributions to public life. *Acanthophis cummingsi* is named after one of Australia's best investigative journalists, Fia Cumming.

In the cases involving the species I named there was no 'favours' sought or received for naming these species after the various people - nor should there be.

The names were assigned solely on the basis of merit and as an honour.

That's how it should be.

Contrary to misinformation by some so-called scientists, the actual process of assigning a scientific name to an undescribed species is actually fairly simple. The 'Rules' as set out by the ICZN dictate the process and the nomenclatural act is the simple part of the equation. More difficult is the 'proving' that the species being named, hasn't already been named previously and if it has been, then no new name can be assigned. Part of this path is also setting out why the newly described form is in fact a separate 'new' species.

Over the years some have abused the system.

There was the case of the corrupt NPWS/NSW official who sought and got a species named after him in return for the continued issuing of licences to the man who described the species. He now claims the honour of having the species named after him for his 'good work'. That is yet another lie coming from the NPWS/NSW bureaucracy.

This was totally corrupt, but fortunately I think cases like this have been the exception rather than the norm.

I suppose we can even compare the naming of species to that of the Queen's birthday honours.

That system was also supposed to reward meritorious people with titles like AO, AOM and Knighthoods ('Sir').

The system has been so debased over recent years that such an honour now usually implies that the recipient has either bought

it, or is completely corrupt.

Take for example names like Sir Robert Askin, Sir Terrence Lewis and the like.

Askin was a corrupt State Premier, while Lewis was a corrupt Police Commissioner, who was later jailed for extorting \$600,000 from hardened criminals.

Fortunately the system of naming species has not yet become so debased that those who are most corrupt or those with the largest wallets are immortally honoured by having species named after them.

Or has it?

On 11 December 1999, page 3 of the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that Dr. Michael Archer of the Australian Museum in Sydney was offering to name invertebrates after people who paid his staff \$5,000. The story ran as follows:

'For \$5,000, Professor Mike Archer is offering to sell humans a shot at immortality this Christmas, a chance to name a new species. Professor Archer, the man who has vowed to bring the Tasmanian tiger back to life and who has arrived at the Australian Museum like an injection of adrenalin, is guaranteeing anyone with a chequebook that he can give a more "real immortality" than religion. His colleague at the museum, invertebrate specialist Dr Winston Ponder, says that at any one time the institution has around 20 species that are available for naming. These include a sea worm, cicadas, freshwater snails and centipedes.'

The scheme has since been promoted further with a glossy mail-out brochure which also appeared with the Museum's quality ANH magazine.

Now before I go on, I must make some important points.

The first is that I do not intend attacking Archer's scientific credentials or general integrity. I am sure his motives in this matter are honourable. He launched the scheme on the basis that the money raised would be used to fund further research. Furthermore, as far as I know, the scheme is at this stage limited to invertebrates.

And while talking about the Australian Museum and its staff, I shall report my own opinions of them. In over 20 years of extensive dealings with the herpetology and other sections, I can only say positive things of them. They have always provided me with every assistance requested, including when publishing papers and books and given me unfettered access to their vast archives of literature, specimens and the like. And while I constantly whinge about the tax-payer's money wasted by government on many things, I think that it appears that most money spent on the museum in Sydney is money well spent. But as for the 'cash for names' idea, I must say that I find it totally abhorrent.

Now I know some of you will be thinking, 'but it's been going on for years, all Archer's done is formalise it', and yes, you are probably correct.

But still I think that the whole idea could cause even greater problems.

In order to raise more money, scientists may rush to name more species and cut corners to do so. This could lead to some of the 'inadequate taxonomy' as described by WA Museum Reptile Curator Ken Aplin, in a recent issue of *Monitor*.

Then there's the problem of who decides the worthiness of the 'charity'. People could legitimately argue that the money raised should go on things like the homeless, rather than on museum exhibits. Or the government could use the extra money raised by selling species names as an excuse to cut the museum's funding. They've done this sort of thing before.

The net result being that the museum and its staff have no more money to do their job.

And then there's my biggest objection.

That's the names themselves.

I could envisage people like Jeff Kennett handing over \$50,000 of taxpayer's funds to have a genus named after him.

Could you imagine books for eternity carrying the name *Kennettus* in honour of this despot?

Okay, so you may be one of the minority who voted for Kennett. Try *SalamHussienus*, *AdolfHitlerus* or whoever you think of as evil.

They have the bucks, they get the name – simple really!

Any way I looked at it, the scheme stank.

So much so I went to the ICZN with a formal complaint.

They have a format for their submissions and I did my complaint accordingly.

I sent it to the ICZN head, Phil Tubbs in the UK.

He replied to me fairly quickly.

He agreed with me.

That was the good part.

The bad part was that he said it was outside of the ICZN's jurisdiction.

He referred to the 'Rules' and I take his word on this.

What does all this mean?

Expect more of the same.

Other institutions will have to emulate the Australian Museum's scheme to remain 'competitive', and yes there will inevitably be a rush of inadequate taxonomy to assign names to the ever dwindling supply of unnamed species.

In the near future, the idea of naming species in honour of decent people may be a thing of the past. Instead it will be a game of scientists extorting money out of the highest bidders.

Oh and what happens if a person parts with a hard-earned \$5,000 only to find that the species named in their honour is later synonymised with an earlier named species?

Do they get a refund?

Or will the ICZN have to bring in new rules to cover such contingencies.

Maybe they'll introduce 'cash for rulings'?

No matter how I look at the new emerging game rules for naming species, I don't like it.

Add to this, the many highly acrimonious disputes over names

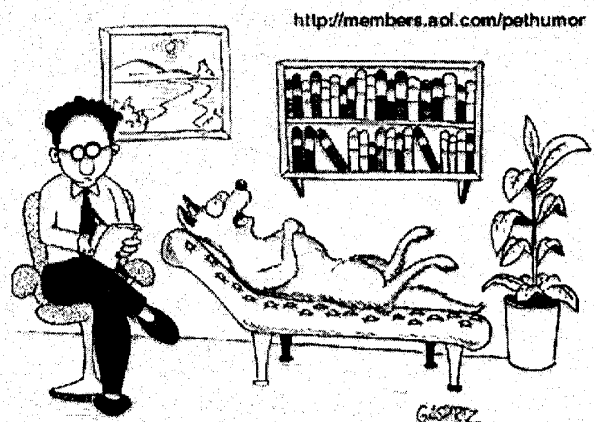
that we already see. e.g. the recent suppression of the names *Varanus gouldii* and *Varanus rosenbergi* (as known and accepted for the last 50 years), by ICZN decree. The attempted suppression of a couple of hundred Wells and Wellington names and so on, it looks like a bumpy ride for taxonomy and nomenclature in the years ahead.

And I'm not just talking reptiles either. The bumpiest ride will probably be for the invertebrates as the 'gold rush' becomes mayhem and more species are inadvertently named more than once.

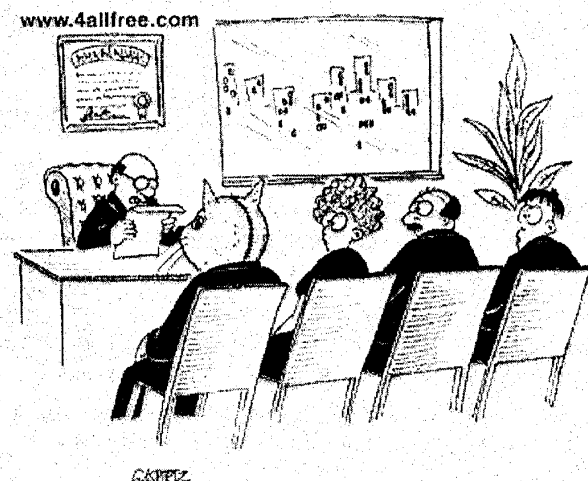
As Hal Cogger said 'Think of the person behind the name'.

I now add 'and ask, how much did they pay for the honour?'

(The letter and submission I sent to the ICZN and their reply are available to peruse at the editor's office.)



Somehow, running aimlessly in circles, barking at harmless passersby, and destroying the evening paper have become meaningless.



Knowing that Aunt Mae had left her fortune to her cat, Harvey came prepared.

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December 11th 1999

TO/ PHIL TUBBS/ANTHEA GENTRY,
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DEAR SIR/MADAM,

I have made a submission to the ICZN on the matter of cash-for-names as reported here in Australia. The submission is self-explanatory.

I have made it in the format you seek for the *Bull. ZN* and hope that you can publish it in there.

I accept that you may have to modify it somewhat before printing it. However I ask that you PLEASE allow me to check over the FINAL DRAFT before going to print.

I am sure that you will appreciate the potential seriousness of the issue raised.

In the first instance I will ONLY be e-mailing this to you as an attached Microsoft Word 7 file – and then in the text of a second e-mail. If you have troubles reading or converting the files, please tell me and we can make other arrangements.

Please acknowledge receipt of the submission when you get it.

Thanking you for your anticipated assistance's.

YOURS SINCERELY.

RAYMOND HOSER.

Case: XXXXX

Cash for Scientific names: proposed outlawing of the practice.

R. T. Hoser,

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Abstract. The purpose of this application is to make it against the ICZN rules for a person to accept any cash or other form of gratuity for designating a scientific name in honour of any person, company or corporation. Furthermore the application seeks to automatically make any name invalid when it is found that any reward, financial or otherwise is given to person for naming a species within ten years of the name being published. This application also asks the ICZN to codify and define the nature of cash or other gratuities relevant to the application.

Keywords. Nomenclature, taxonomy, names, cash, financial rewards, Australia.

- 1. On 11 December 1999, the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper (p. 3) reported that Professor Michael Archer of the Australian Museum, Sydney intended offering people the right to have undescribed species named after them for a \$5,000 fee. The scheme was being promoted as a Christmas gift for 'for the relative with everything'.**
- 2. For the purposes of this submission, the article cited above is accepted as being truthfully reported and factually correct.**
- 3. The idea of debasing zoology to the level of having those with the cash being able to demand having species named in their 'honour' is abhorrent to those zoologists who have devoted their lifetimes to the study of animals. It is akin to the now discredited idea of bent Australian politicians and public figures buying a knighthood from the Crown. In reference to corrupt people buying Knighthoods, this author refers to a corrupt Police Commissioner, 'Sir' Terrence Lewis, who is alleged to have 'bought' his knighthood. He was forced to relinquish the honour after he was convicted and jailed for extorting \$600,000 from criminals in Brisbane, Australia. NSW Premier Sir Robert Askin was also reputed to have bought his knighthood. Askin's corruption was proven only after his wife's death, whereupon investigations were made into how she was able to leave a vast estate that reflected wealth far beyond her late husband's reputed legal earnings. Refer to Hoser (1999a, 1999b) for relevant information.**
- 4. The plan will inevitably lead to unworthy people and despots being honoured in such a way, and these same people later using the fact a species has been named after them to claim a credibility that they may otherwise not be entitled to.**
- 5. There are also a number of other inherent problems in the scheme as proposed by Archer. Should the Archer plan go ahead, it may well set a precedent whereby other scientists will abuse their positions to line their own pockets by hastily naming a number of new species solely in order to collect vast sums of cash.**
- 6. Raymond Hoser holds Michael Archer and his colleagues at the Australian Museum in the highest regard and have worked with**

many in the past on zoological matters. Furthermore while there is no doubt that the money they collect will be put to good use, it is obvious that the idea will be seized upon by other less scrupulous people to collect money purely for their own commercial gain.

7. Once a new species that does not carry a valid name is identified, the naming part is in fact quite simple and straightforward. The procedure is published in "The Rules" by the ICZN and is available to anyone who wishes to pay the nominal amount of about US\$35 for it.
8. However while the act of naming a new species is fairly simple, it is currently a scientific convention that a substantial amount of research is done on a new species (and if possible related species) before one rushes to print with a new species description.
9. In 1984-5 two herpetologists, Richard Wells and Cliff Ross Wellington published three papers describing hundreds of new species of reptile and frog. The Australian Society of Herpetologists (ASH) then petitioned the ICZN in June 1987 (unsuccessfully) to have the works suppressed (ICZN case number 2531). Most of the names now have validity in perpetuity.
10. The general consensus was that some of the Wells and Wellington descriptions, (of no more than a few lines) were clearly inadequate. They were however within "The Rules" as set out by the ICZN and/or outside of the ICZN's terms of reference and jurisdiction. ASH and others claimed that the Wells and Wellington events threw Australian science into chaos and warned strongly against their actions setting a precedent (see Aplin 1999). The two men were vilified by other scientists and effectively shut off from most other herpetologists in Australia. However taking the Wells and Wellington act to it's logical end conclusion in light of the 'cash for names' scenario, the two men could have made themselves instant millionaires by charging people \$5,000 per species name assigned.
11. Should the Archer 'cash-for-names' scheme get off the ground, there is no doubt it will be used by others to fund their own ventures. By way of example, this author would have to seriously consider using a similar scheme to name some of the dozens of undescribed Australian reptiles to fund a reprint of the *Endangered Animals of Australia* book, published in 1991 and now out of print.
12. Other zoologists would also jump on the bandwagon and again it is noted that sooner or later the system would be abused, perhaps to buy cars and boats instead of funding science and education.
13. In the most recent issue of the reptile journal *Monitor* of which this author is editor, we published an article by Dr. Ken Aplin of the WA Museum complaining about "inadequate taxonomy". Should the 'cash-for-names' scheme or idea become more widely used, it could be guaranteed that there will be even more "inadequate taxonomy".
14. The chaos feared when Wells and Wellington rushed into print with hundreds of new genus and species descriptions will be but a

Sunday picnic compared with the new taxonomic chaos about to be unleashed should 'cash-for-names' gain widespread acceptance and currency..

15. The International Commission for Zoological Nomenclature is accordingly asked to:

(1) Use its plenary powers to outlaw or prohibit the validation of scientific names assigned to persons, companies, groups or corporations that are found to have paid a financial or other gratuity for the action. The International Commission for Zoological Nomenclature is hereby asked to do this by automatically declaring invalid (*nomen nudem*) any name derived by this means.

(2) To use the above proposed rule/s to place on the Official Record of Rejected and Invalid Names in Zoology scientific names assigned to persons, companies, groups or corporations that are found to have paid a financial or other gratuity for the action if that name does gain widespread acceptance and/or use.

(3) The above rule/s to only apply provided that it is either published and/or brought to the ICZN's attention within fifteen years of the original description being published.

(4) The ICZN to rule that provision or loan of specimens for any purpose not to be defined as a gratuity.

(5) The ICZN to rule that provision of wages or salaries in the course of one's normal paid employment not to be defined as a gratuity.

(6) The ICZN to rule that provision of normal working benefits or conditions by an employer not to be defined as a gratuity.

(6) The ICZN to set a commencement date for the above rules to apply and to make that date as early as practicable.

References:

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Subject: "Names for cash"
Date: Wed, 15 Dec 1999 12:23:32 +0000
From: Philip Tubbs <P.Tubbs@nhm.ac.uk>
To: adder@smuggled.com

Dear Mr Hoser,

Thank you for your message and the attached draft application relating to "names for cash".

The idea is far from new, and of course there are many grey areas (people from the 18th century onwards have often named animals and plants after their mentors and sponsors!). You are not alone in regarding the "sale" of names for cash as undesirable (I myself would join you in this), and in some circumstances unethical.

Your draft application relates directly to ethics, and the Commission has always resolved that it should not, and cannot, get involved in any aspect of this field. A new edition of the Code has just been published, as you probably know, and like its predecessors this contains an Appendix (a "Code of Ethics"). Point 4 of this reads "No author should propose a name that, to his or her knowledge or reasonable belief, would be likely to give offence on any grounds"; point 7 reads "The observation of these principles [of ethics] is a matter for the proper feelings and conscience of individual zoologists, and the Commission is not empowered to investigate or rule upon alleged breaches of them". It follows that the Commission cannot rule on, or even consider, any matter which is purely one of propriety, whatever might be the individual opinions of its members.

Quite apart from this overriding position, the practicalities would be insuperable. They would involve the retrospective disqualifying of names on the sole ground that they had been formulated expressly in return for some financial transaction of benefit to the authors; this would be difficult to demonstrate objectively and the many complications (at each stage of the argument) are obvious. The Commission can deal only with the objective status of names and their impact on biological science, not with the motives (actual or supposed) of their authors.

As you will see, it is not possible for the Commission to deal with applications such as the one you have sent, though this is certainly not to say that members would approve of the making of offers of "names for sale". I hope you will not regard this as "censorship"; it is merely the case that ethics fall outside the Commission's remit.

With best wishes for the season and the new century,

Philip Tubbs

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