

## Barcode of life holds the key

By Myrtle Ryan

Check the barcode. We're not talking stocks on the supermarket shelves, but a "DNA barcode" which will identify species rapidly and accurately.

Be it an invasive species, a disease-spreading agent or an agricultural pest, DNA will have its number.

This week Dr Robert Hanner - Associate Director for the Canadian Barcode of Life Network, and Chairman of the Database Working Group for the International Consortium for the Barcode of Life initiative - was in South Africa to explain how DNA barcoding could have an impact on our lives.

A small fragment of tissue, taken from any animal, juvenile or adult, male or female, he said, could provide a unique identifier or "DNA barcode" for every living species on Earth.

Stored in data-bases, which could be easily accessed, such information could save millions of rands, and be pivotal in improving human health and the natural environment.

Speaking at a seminar organised by the South African Institute for Aquatic Biodiversity in Grahamstown, Hanner said the concept of DNA barcoding had met with both controversy and acclaim.

An international consortium believes barcoding holds the key to science of the future. Hanner also serves as co-ordinator for the Fish Barcode of Life campaign, a global project which aims to assemble DNA barcodes for all fishes.

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