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Barcode of Life project seeks further partners from developing countries

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An international project to 'barcode' all animal and plant species has just got underway, but not without calls for the further involvement of developing countries.

The Consortium for the Barcode of Life (CBOL) brings together over 50 organisations from 22 countries across six continents. The partners will use DNA barcoding - a short DNA sequence from a standard position in the genome - to establish a giant catalogue of life. The barcodes will be interesting for those trying to discover, distinguish and describe new species, and for anyone attempting to assign an unidentified specimen to a known species.



'If we don't know what species we have, how can we know what we're losing and take practical steps to stem the loss of the world's plants and animals? Just as the human genome project inspired new ways of human biological research, we hope that barcoding DNA will lead to new ways of investigating ecology and evolution that can be of use to all,' said Dr Richard Lane, director of science at the Natural History Museum in the UK.

The sixteen European partners in the consortium represent Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK.

While the consortium does contain partners from Ghana, South Africa, Iran, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Costa Rica, the project coordinators are eager to encourage more developing countries to join. While industrialised countries will easily find the funding to purchase equipment for analysing gene sequences, it is developing countries that are rich in biodiversity.

Developing countries themselves would like to be considered as equal partners, however, and not just as collecting grounds for specimens. 'Let us join in with you instead of you doing all the driving,' the executive dean of science and technology at the University of Fort Hare in South Africa, Daniel Okeyo, told participants at a launch conference in the UK.

Scientists from all partner countries are hoping that the project will help to revive interest in taxonomy, which has lost its appeal among students. Taxonomy - the discovery, description and classification of different species - is the foundation upon which evolutionary biology rests. When the science was first practised in the 18th century, most species were differentiated by their adult morphology, but more sophisticated approaches such as electron microscopy, behavioural traits and biochemical markers are now used as well.

Three specific projects have now been launched, involving the barcoding of birds, fish and plants. It is estimated that less than one fifth of the Earth's ten million species of plants and animals have been named, and the consortium is hoping to rectify this by 2010.