

## **Naming authority faces extinction**

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Scientists in a race against time to complete an inventory of all life on Earth face an irony: the body that decides on scientific names is itself facing extinction.

The International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature is the high court of appeal in all disputes about the Linnean system of species identification which covers the range from 150m-year-old fossils to creatures caught yesterday in an entomologist's net.

The commission has 25 unpaid expert advisers, a store of biological wisdom, and a reservoir of Latin scholarship. And it has almost no money.

Its guiding trust, led by the Earl of Cranbrook, has just launched a £3m appeal.

"We are practically facing extinction," said Andrew Polaszek, its executive secretary, from his office in the Natural History Museum. "We produce the international code, which is effectively the bible, the handbook that zoologists who name animals, or who are in some way involved, have to use. That's a book of over 300 pages of very complex and sometimes quite impenetrable rules governing the way animal names are formed and regulated. Part of our job is to make that easier for the zoological community."

The commission was formed in 1895 when French, German, British and US zoologists, all of whom used their own national codes and conventions, decided there should be just one agreed naming system.

"We step in where there is a problem," Dr Polaszek said. "There might be two names for the same animal. There is a principle of priority that says the older name should be used; the younger name becomes a synonym. But if the younger name has been used in 1,000 articles for the past 50 years, and the older name has just been dug up, then we have to step in."

The Barcode of Life project will accelerate the rate at which creatures are named, but multiply the potential for dispute.

"The ICZN is the ideal body for this purpose," Dr Polaszek said. "The irony in all this is that financially we are due to sink in a few years."