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DNA barcodes reveal many more shrimp in the sea

(New Scientist Via Thomson Dialog NewsEdge) WITH ocean life under ever greater threat, a scramble is on to catalogue marine diversity before it disappears. Biologists are finding that there is much more down there than anyone ever imagined.

Paul Barber of the Boston University Marine Program in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, and Sarah Boyce of Harvard University use the technique known as DNA barcoding to catalogue species. By reading a short length of mitochondrial DNA, known species can be identified, and the number of unknown species can be estimated on the basis of variations in the length of that DNA. When Barber and Boyce used the method to distinguish species of mantis shrimp in the western Pacific Ocean, they found 50 to 150 per cent more unknown species than expected. They say that the diversity of less well-studied animal groups could exceed expectations by even more (Proceedings of the Royal Society B

, DOI: 10.1098/rspb.2006.3540).

Capturing larvae floating in open water is relatively easy. Once captured, though, the newly discovered species are proving difficult to classify. Barber and Boyce say that the DNA tests they use need to be backed up with traditional taxonomic classifications, and lack of funding is threatening this work.

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