



Helping Solve the “Other” Taxonomic Impediment: Completing the *Eight Steps to Total Enlightenment and Taxonomic Nirvana*

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“To discover is to draw the veil. It is not to run into something and keep it to oneself. It is to push back the frontier of infinity and to pass the news on to posterity.”

—Mauricio Obregón

Background

Simply put: despite over ten years of recognizing the problem and giving it a catchy phrase, we still lack the taxonomic expertise to effectively describe the remaining biodiversity on earth. How can we enjoy and protect something if we don’t know it is out there to enjoy and protect?

The Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biodiversity (COP) at their meeting in Jakarta in 1995 echoed the warnings of previous committees organized around the world to outline the problems we face in the future of taxonomy. The perception by the COP of a lack of taxonomists to handle the enormous task identifying and naming the biodiversity we have yet to describe on this earth led the IUBS/Diversitas to term this lack of expertise as the “taxonomic impediment”¹. Elaine Hoagland (1996) highlighted the term in her white paper on the subject for the COP. Her paper precipitated an overwhelming chorus of “I second that” by fellow taxonomists as well as in their subsequent discussions that fine-tuned proclamations of the need and the methods by which we could solve the problem.

Two years previous to Hoagland’s report, the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) created the PEET program (Partnerships for Enhancing Expertise in Taxonomy) to enhance and increase taxonomic expertise in areas where it is deemed by colleagues and NSF review panels to be sorely lacking. Nine years later, NSF proudly declared “Taxonomic Impediment Overcome” (Rodman & Cody, 2003). The article’s headline may have been a bit more embellishment than reality, but nevertheless, the effort by NSF in creating the PEET program—and also at about the same time the Biotic Surveys and Inventories Program (BS&I) (meant to foster broadscale collecting and discovery of species throughout the world) cannot be understated. They were both major leaps forward in showing the world that governments could in fact get behind taxonomy and support increasing the expertise that was lacking in that discipline and critical steps to helping solve that problem.

While even the most recent editorials on the taxonomic impediment and their respective responses (e.g., Wheeler *et al.*, 2004; Lyal & Wietzmann, 2004; Martin, 2004; Geeta *et al.* 2004; Causey *et al.*, 2004; Young, 2004; Carvalho *et al.*, 2005) may argue the details, they clearly all agree with each other that we still lack taxonomic expertise to adequately describe the biodiversity on this planet. However, they all have apparently missed another “taxonomic impediment”: one that darkens the potential successes made by NSF funding and other advances. Namely, that some of the existing taxonomists are not doing much or even any taxonomy. Numerous reasons exist for this unfortunate dilemma (see Summary below). Some that are inherently

1. Earlier uses of the phrase “taxonomic impediment” (e.g., Taylor, 1976; Ramsay, 1986; McIntyre *et al.*, 1992) are for aspects of taxonomic poverty other than lack of taxonomic expertise.