The World Register of Marine Species, the first online inventory of all marine species

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The World Register of Marine Species (WoRMS) is a collaborative effort by over 200 world-leading taxonomists from 27 countries to create an authoritative, open-access web-resource for all marine species (and where editors wish, their terrestrial and freshwater relatives).

In 2007, this register of marine species grew out of the European Register of Marine Species (ERMS), and its combination with several other species registers maintained at the Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ) in the framework of the EU Network of Excellence ‘Marine Biodiversity and Ecosystem Functioning’ (MarBEF). It now integrates and hosts over 20 global (Cetacea, Porifera, Copepoda, Isopoda …), regional (Europe, Antarctica, Canada, Eastern Africa …) and thematic (harmful algae, invasive species …) databases. Rather than building separate registers for all projects, and to make sure the taxonomy used in these different projects is consistent, VLIZ developed a single consolidated database. Editors are provided with privileged online access to the taxa they are responsible for and only need to edit the information once.

WoRMS works with related initiatives to ensure complementarity and makes its content permanently available to readers and to other databases, including the Ocean Biogeographic Information System, Species 2000’s Catalogue of Life, SeaLifeBase and the Encyclopedia of Life. Via our website, web services and full download access, many institutions, national and international data centres and research groups are using WoRMS as their standard taxonomic reference and therefore it provides an important quality control mechanism.

WoRMS is one of the very few online resources with a permanent host institution. VLIZ has a government funded professional data centre with a strong focus on biological data management. The intellectual property rights of WoRMS are governed by the scientific Society for the Management of Electronic Biodiversity Data (SMEBD). All editors are life-members of SMEBD and elect a governing council which appoints host institutions for its databases, rather like a society may have a publisher for its journal.

As of 1\textsuperscript{st} May 2010, WoRMS contains 330,000 scientific (Latin) names, of which 176,000 valid species names and 90,000 important synonyms (i.e. incorrect names in use), 18,000 vernacular names, 137,000 key literature references, 42,000 specimen details, 224,000 published distributions, 90,000 web links, 12,000 images and many other species related information (biology, habitat, feeding type …).

WoRMS is recognized as an affiliated project by the Census of Marine Life and we cooperate to achieve our common goal of inventoring all described marine species by the end of 2010.