



# Letters to the Editor

## Lots of biodiversity research services... but for whom?

Madam, – In a recent electronic forum on European biodiversity research, I lamented that taxonomy is disappearing and that there is no European policy aimed at reviving it. My lament stemmed from an awareness that such a policy is being enforced in the United States. I have worked with the Partnership for Enhancing Expertise in Taxonomy (PEET; <http://web.nhm.ku.edu/peet/>), an initiative of the US National Science Foundation (NSF) to train new taxonomists. When I said that there is nothing like this in Europe, I was sent, by a very motivated and sympathetic EU official, a list of initiatives devoted to biodiversity research that have absorbed many millions of euro (see box).

I participated in the launching of some of these. And withdrew. Look at them. They provide services, networking, databases, and access to museum collections, but no research. Producing a list should require taxonomic revision, which results from each PEET grant. Here, we have all these beautiful services but not a single eurocent (at least from this list) to perform research. Who is going to take advantage of these services? There are no positions for taxonomists, because they do not attract grants. NSF will provide money for revisionary work so that the new taxonomists will have status by attracting research money. Of course the money is not given to sustain taxonomists, but because good taxonomy is necessary to enforce a proper biodiversity policy. Have another look at the list. Literature is the basis of taxonomic work. We need services such as a bibliographic database to provide pdf files of papers containing original descriptions and revisions in order to do taxonomic work, but there is no facility for literature either in these projects.

While these projects were running, with no dedicated project (besides fringes of other projects, some PEET money, and financial support for the publication) a group of fanatics produced this:-

**J Bouillon, MD Medel, F Pagès, JM Gili, F Boero, C Gravili, 2004.** Fauna of the Mediterranean Hydrozoa. *Scientia Marina*, 68 (Suppl 2), 449pp.

This first published monograph on the Hydrozoa of the Mediterranean is downloadable for free at <http://www.icm.csic.es/scimar/68s2.html>, or can be bought by contacting *Scientia Marina* at this site. The same authors are preparing a monograph with the diagnoses of all supra-

### Box 1. EU initiatives devoted to biodiversity research.

1. ABC: IHP\* project allowing European researchers to work on Belgian collections.
2. BIOCASE: a Biological Collection Access Service for Europe.
3. BioCISE: Resource Identification for a Biological Collection Information Service in Europe.
4. BIOD-IBERIA: IHP project allowing European biodiversity researchers to work at Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales and Real Jardín Botánico.
5. BIORESOURCE: IHP project allowing European researchers to do systematics research at the British Natural History Museum, Royal Botanic Garden, Kew and Linnean Society of London.
6. CDEFD: prepared a common data structure for European Floristic Data-bases.
7. COBICE: IHP project allowing European researchers to work on University of Copenhagen Biosystematics Centre collections.
8. COLPARSYST: follow-up to PARSYST (see below).
9. ENBI: a network of biodiversity information centres of the western European Palaearctic allowing European researchers access to technical and human resources, and biodiversity expertise.
10. ENHSIN: an infrastructure of European natural history specimen databases developed by the European Natural History Specimen Information Network.
11. ERMS: developed the European Register of Marine Species.
12. EURO+MED Plantbase: provided an information system for the vascular plants of Europe and the Mediterranean region.
13. EuroCat: will enumerate and provide web access to basic taxonomic information on all known species of plants, animals, fungi and microbes: see Species 2000.
14. EUROFLUKES: developing a database of photos of cetaceans.
15. Fauna Europaea: assembling a database of scientific names and distribution of all existing multicellular European land and freshwater animals.
16. HIGH LAT: IHP project allowing European researchers access to collections and facilities of the Swedish Museum of Natural History.
17. PARSYST: IHP project allowing European researchers access to systematics collections and facilities of the Paris Natural History Museum.
18. SYS-RESOURCE: follow-up to BIO-RESOURCE.
19. TAXIP: allows informatics researchers access to taxonomic information facilities processing of the Zoological Museum, University of Amsterdam.
20. SYNTHESYS: focuses on access (to data, collections and expertise), policies and standards relating to the large natural history collections of Europe.

\*Improving Human Potential, EU-funded initiative

specific taxa of Hydrozoa of the world, with a list of all nominal species, to be published as one of the Memoirs of the Paris Natural History Museum. This monograph will have identification keys with a description, figure and references for each name.

The main initiator of these two enterprises was Jean Bouillon. Since his retirement, no Hydrozoa specialists are left in Belgium. The same is happening throughout Europe, but new taxonomy positions are out of question. MarBEF is no exception in this scenario. We have money to travel, to meet, but no money to do actual research.

Soon, the 7th Framework Programme will arrive with money for biodiversity – about €10 million, I heard from a birdie. I do not believe in predictive science in ecology, but in this case I predict that this money will be used to support beautiful facilities, nicely accessible lists, beautifully inventoried type specimens, and courses. If I hire a taxonomist, how much of this European money will s/he attract? Do taxonomists have to be present only in museums? If there are no taxonomists in universities, who will teach this aspect of biodiversity? If they are not represented in marine stations, who will work on live material? No one denies the importance of taxonomy for biodiversity research, and few deny that taxonomy is in crisis because there are no opportunities for young taxonomists. Maybe we need a proper EU policy to solve this problem, and maybe, for once, we might rightly copy the United States and their PEET.

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