

People-inspired names remain valuable



We respect the concerns raised by Guedes et al.¹ regarding the problematic history of scientific names given to honour colonizers of the past. Their arguments, however, are informed by a narrow focus on a relatively small group of species (terrestrial African vertebrates). Considered outside of this view, their recommendations appear inconsistent and impractical. Moreover, their proposal to rename all organisms that currently bear eponyms would result in a massive diversion of scarce taxonomic resources from a more-pressing global challenge: to scientifically describe the world's biodiversity to help to avoid its loss.

The arguments of Guedes and colleagues¹ rest on an analysis of African vertebrates, but most of these already have scientific names: indeed, new species of vertebrates today number only in the single or double digits annually. By contrast, over 90% of all fungi, 80% of all insects and 20% of all plant species lack a scientific name^{2,3}, despite thousands of new names being coined every year for these species-rich groups^{4,5}. Newly coined eponyms honour a

wider range of persons than in the past (for example, in Brazil) (Fig. 1a, Supplementary Table 1) and recognize critical individual contributions – for scientific work or by provision of intellectual, logistical, financial or other forms of support to research and conservation. Renaming all eponymic taxa would be time-consuming and would divert valuable resources and time away from naming this undescribed diversity at a time of unprecedented biodiversity loss.

The [International Code of Nomenclature for algae, fungi, and plants](#) recommends (rec. 20A.1h) against naming genera for people who are unconnected with natural science and proposals have been made to extend this to all taxonomic levels⁶. No similar recommendations exist in the [International Code of Zoological Nomenclature](#). We urge taxonomic communities to take the opportunity of increased interest in names to discuss best practice for scientific naming and develop recommendations for the future, just as Linnaeus did in the 18th century⁷. Likewise, research organizations may consider developing policies and guidance for their researchers and students.

Without dismissing the discomfort that eponyms of the past may cause and the sentiments of those who wish to redress these wrongs, we feel that the already scarce resources in taxonomy should be concentrated on the massive task of documenting the world's biodiversity, which is essential to support its conservation. This will require providing increased opportunities and training for taxonomists worldwide, but particularly in low-income, biodiverse countries. One example is Mozambique, which is home to at least 16% of all African terrestrial vertebrates – the same group analysed by Guedes et al.¹. We argue that the relatively small proportion of eponymic species (Fig. 1b) is less concerning than the fact that not even one of them was named with a Mozambique national as lead author (Fig. 1c, Supplementary Table 2). In a continent whose biodiversity remains vastly understudied⁸, concentrating resources on correcting scientific names should be the least of priorities. Our focus should be on describing and documenting biodiversity, and not on attempts to sanitize language in lieu of making actual progress towards equity and the celebration of diversity in science.

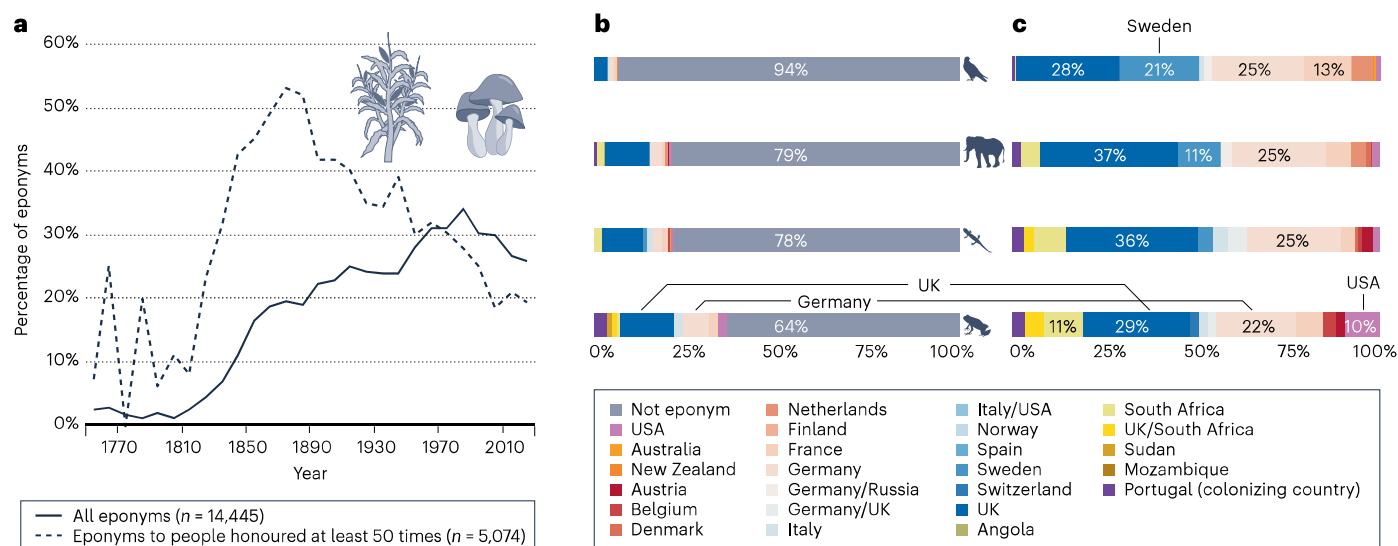


Fig. 1 | Proportion of eponyms in species of plants and fungi from Brazil and terrestrial vertebrates in Mozambique. a, At least 14,445 out of 73,576 names of Brazilian plants and fungi are potential eponyms, but the proportion of people honoured 50 or more times (most of whom could be classified as colonizers) has decreased over the past 150 years. **b**, Countries whose nationals provide eponyms to terrestrial vertebrates that occur in Mozambique. Of the 1,295 names analysed, 94% of birds, 79% of mammals, 78% of lizards and 64% of frogs are not eponyms.

c, Nationality of lead authors of the species descriptions in **b**. In Mozambique, no description of a terrestrial vertebrate has been led by a country national, and only five eponyms honour nationals from its former colonizing country (Portugal). The categories Germany/Russia, Germany/UK and UK/South Africa refer to authors with dual nationalities. The Supplementary Information provides the underlying data and details on methods and data sources.

Introducing additional complexity to naming standards could slow down the documentation of biodiversity, which is a risk we cannot afford at a time of crisis. Mass renaming would also complicate access to existing taxonomic literature, including the regional floras, faunas and fungus that are so essential to field biology and conservation. Ultimately, we argue it is a taxonomist's responsibility – as well as within the bounds of academic freedom – to construct appropriate scientific names.

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Author contributions

All authors discussed and agreed on the contents of this paper. A.A. and S.K. led the writing, with contributions from all authors. H.F. and M.C.-S. compiled the data and performed the analyses.

Positionality statement: we are botanists, mycologists and zoologists from the Global South and Global North, several of us with experience in scientifically describing new species and handling species descriptions for journals. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of our organizations.

Competing interests

A.A. is Director of Science at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, where researchers describe many new plant and fungal species to science every year. S.K. is the Acting Past President of the International Association for Plant Taxonomy and the President of the Nomenclature Section of the 20th International Botanical Congress. The other authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

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