

Eponyms are important tools for biologists in the Global South



Guedes et al.¹ argue that eponymous scientific names, despite their long tradition in biology, have no place in the modern world. They want to erase eponyms assigned to species in the past and want scientists to stop naming new species after people. Both of these proposals would hurt science, and disproportionately hurt science in the Global South – the region that is supposed to be the primary beneficiary of their proposal.

As Guedes et al. recognize, naming species after people has always been a powerful tool that biologists have used to thank their patrons, recognize their field assistants and honour their colleagues or loved ones. This is the highest honour that an individual biologist can bestow on a person; we have very little else at our disposal. In recent years some biologists have also used the naming of species to raise funds for research and, especially, for conservation. Guedes et al. mentioned the auctioning of names by the Rainforest Trust. Fundación EcoMinga² – an Ecuadorian non-governmental organization that is managed by some of us – was the beneficiary of two naming auctions for species new to science^{3,4}. With these funds the foundation was able to pay for journal publication fees so that the resulting articles would be open access as well as pay for some of the logistics of the investigations. Most importantly, we were able to use the funds to help to directly conserve many hundreds of hectares of the habitats of these very same species. In many megadiverse countries of the tropics, funds for these purposes are otherwise scarce or non-existent.

Although it is true that most eponyms assigned have historically honoured Europeans, the pace of species discovery in tropical countries is currently high and in the past few decades local taxonomists (at least in Latin America) are overtaking European scientists in making these discoveries. The power of bestowing eponyms has shifted to these local scientists in the tropical countries where most undiscovered species live. For example, in the Ecuadorian province of Tungurahua (where Fundación EcoMinga began its conservation work) all 15 new frog species that have been discovered there in the past

15 years were described in publications with Ecuadorian lead authors, and in many cases all other co-authors were also Ecuadorian. Eleven of those species descriptions used eponyms. Using eponyms, local scientists can now fund their work, honour local scientists⁵, recognize Indigenous leaders⁶ and policy-makers⁷, and help to save their study organisms from extinction³. It is unfortunate and discriminatory that some members of the scientific community want to take away this tool just at the moment that non-European biologists are becoming its main beneficiaries. Rather than eliminating eponyms, causing chaos in the existing nomenclature and erasing the rich and convoluted personal history of biology, we should instead embrace them enthusiastically and use them to generate and record the next and more-diverse chapters of that history.

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Competing interests

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