

Book Review

# On More Than Fish Eponyms. Book Review: Beolens et al. *Eponym Dictionary of Fishes*; Whittle Publishing: Caithness, UK, 2023; ISBN: 978-1-84995-498-3

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This review deals with the magnificent and monumental ‘*Eponym Dictionary of Fishes*’, which provides nearly 6500 short biographical sketches for the persons whose name is part of the scientific name (genus and/or species epithet) of a fish formally described before this book was completed, i.e., an eponym. This book, also available as a PDF, is part of an excellent, broad series that covers other groups of vertebrates.

For each eponymized person, their sketch, on its first line, gives their full name, nationality, years of birth and death, and main occupation. This basic information, which will be included in FishBase ([www.fishbase.org](http://www.fishbase.org)) with a full reference to its source, is complemented in the book by a short biography which provides, among other information, the reason why a fish species or genus was named after them. Obviously, these bibliographies are longer for some persons than others, given the character of their contribution to ichthyology, if any.

This book will be invaluable to anyone studying the history of ichthyology, and thus, the team that maintain FishBase will strive to update at least the minimum amount of information on the person behind eponymous names that will appear since this book was published.

This book will also be useful for the various discussions now developing on the appropriateness of eponymous names in biology, which occur at two levels, one concerning standardized common names, the other Linnaean scientific names.

Thus, concerning the former, the author welcomes the initiative whose motto is “Bird Names for Birds”, which will lead to eponymous common names of birds, in the U.S., being given new common names reflecting traits to these birds (e.g., coloration or habits), which will replace the name of various slaveholders, like ‘Lewis’s woodpecker’, or genocidal killers of Native Americans, like ‘Scott’s Oriole’.

A similar fate occurred to the journal *Copeia*, now called *Ichthyology & Herpetology*, given that E. D. Cope held racist and misogynistic views which were extreme even for his time and social milieu.

Replacing eponyms that are part of Linnaean scientific names is an altogether different challenge. This is true even if one is disgusted by the name of the beetle *Anophthalmus hitleri*, which, as a blind, cave-dwelling animal, was not responsible for the name that that was inflicted on it.

Some scientists argue that this name should be maintained to ensure nomenclatural stability, along with other eponyms celebrating other reprehensible characters, or names which are derogatory, e.g., the ‘kaffirbloom coral’ (*Erythrina caffra*), a plant whose common name should be retired even if its specific epithet should not.

It seems strange to me that, while there is an increasing number of (younger?) scientists wanting to purge the Linnaean system of eponyms, no one has apparently come up with a resolution to ban eponymic scientific names in future editions of the ‘Code.’ In fact, it is interesting that there seems to be no push for *that*, and it may have to do with the current



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preference for performative over substantial actions. Similarly, I would certainly like for people to go after *living* racists, and let the taxonomists transfer the names of the dead ones from one nomenclatural grave to the other.

But my scientific opinion on this does not matter: I am 78 years old, and not only have I never published anything relevant to taxonomy, but I never will. As a Black person, however, I prefer these horrible Linnean eponyms to remain part of the scientific literature, including *Anophthalmus hitleri*. They will remind us forever that systemic racism, sexism, war mongering, and other ills that we still cannot seem to be able overcome can and do infect science, and have frequently done so. This book, and the other in its series, will help, via their eponyms, to remind us that we ought to deal with these issues *now*, as they affect real people, not blind beetles in 1937 in a Slovenian cave.

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