



New species and subspecies descriptions do not and should not always require a dead type specimen

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Abstract

Dubois & Nemésio (2007) recently considered that the present International Code for Zoological Nomenclature (“Code”) could reasonably be interpreted as requiring the deposition of dead vouchers for new species and subspecies descriptions. They considered that, to the extent that there is lack of clarity, the Code should be amended so as to require the deposition of a dead voucher. They doubted the utility of photographs and other materials for descriptions and suggested that ethical or moral concerns about the taking of dead type specimens were poorly supported. Dubois & Nemésio (2007)’s preferred interpretations of the current Code are not supported by members of the Commission. Possible reasons why the collection of a dead type specimen might not be necessary or recommended include the setting of a good example to communities in whose hands conservation action lies, government permit issues and the description of new taxa on the brink of extinction where collecting may impact populations. The Code should be liberal in relation to the nature of type specimens to enable taxonomists, who are the persons best placed to take decisions, to make appropriate judgments for particular descriptions.

Key words: Nomenclatural availability, vouchers, collections, type specimen, illustrations, samples, ethics, DNA sequences, *Code*, Commission

Introduction

Dubois & Nemésio (2007) recently discussed whether dead voucher specimens are or should be required to be deposited in order for a new species or subspecies description to be valid for purposes of the Code. Although alternative views were alluded to and discussed — and I paraphrase here — the overall thrust of Dubois & Nemésio (2007)’s paper is that the Code can reasonably be interpreted as requiring the deposition of a complete, dead voucher for a species or subspecies description; and that so it should do.

The references to ‘dead’ type specimens herein are not intended to be inflammatory, but are used to compare the situation where an individual is released, with a DNA sample (e.g. blood sample) or other part of the specimen (e.g. feathers, hair clippings, scales) removed and deposited as a voucher; or where a description is based solely upon illustrations (e.g. photography) without any sample. Dubois & Nemésio (2007) do not discuss in detail the application of the Code to these rather different situations. I do not deal here with taxa described through ‘phylogenetic definitions’, which are a rather separate issue in relation to which I sympathise with Dubois & Nemésio (2007)’s concerns.

There is a considerable amount of literature on the topic of collecting generally, including in relation to new species descriptions. Various papers concerning collecting in ornithology have interesting perspectives on the topic but some were not cited by Dubois & Nemésio (2007). I mention the following publications here for purposes of including a more complete literature review in this exchange of papers: American Bird Con-