



## The “Mihi itch”—a brief history

NEAL L. EVENHUIS

*J.L. Gressitt Center for Entomological Research, Bishop Museum, 1525 Bernice street, Honolulu, Hawai‘i 96817-2704, USA.  
E-mail: neale@bishopmuseum.org*

### Abstract

The origin and history of the phrases *mihi itch* and its predecessor *Mihisucht* are reviewed.

**Key words:** *mihi itch*, *Mihisucht*, splitters, taxonomy, history

*“I trust no one will detect symptoms of my being tormented by that morbid thirst for naming new species which makes so many modern works in entomology, rather magazines of undigested and insulated facts than harmonious histories of nature.”*

—William S. Macleay

### Introduction

I do not suppose that the famous invertebrate zoologist William Sharp Macleay, in making the quote above (Macleay 1838: 2), could have foreseen that this “morbid thirst for naming new species” would take on more concise and colorful phraseology in two languages a few decades later. But it apparently did.

In a recent article on taxonomic inflation by Alain Dubois, he used the term *nomenclatural mihilism* for “Unwarranted descriptions of new taxa, purported to differ only very slightly from already established taxa, with the clear purpose of trying to ‘immortalize’ their authors” (Dubois 2008: 859). The use of the term (attributed to Bruun, 1950) caused one of my synapses to wake up and to fire for a millisecond or two. Where had I heard that before? Some of Dubois’s article pertained to the perceived problem of unwarranted names being proposed only to immortalize the name of the author proposing them. *Mihilism*? Hmmm ... Ah ha! Of course! He was talking about the *mihi itch*!

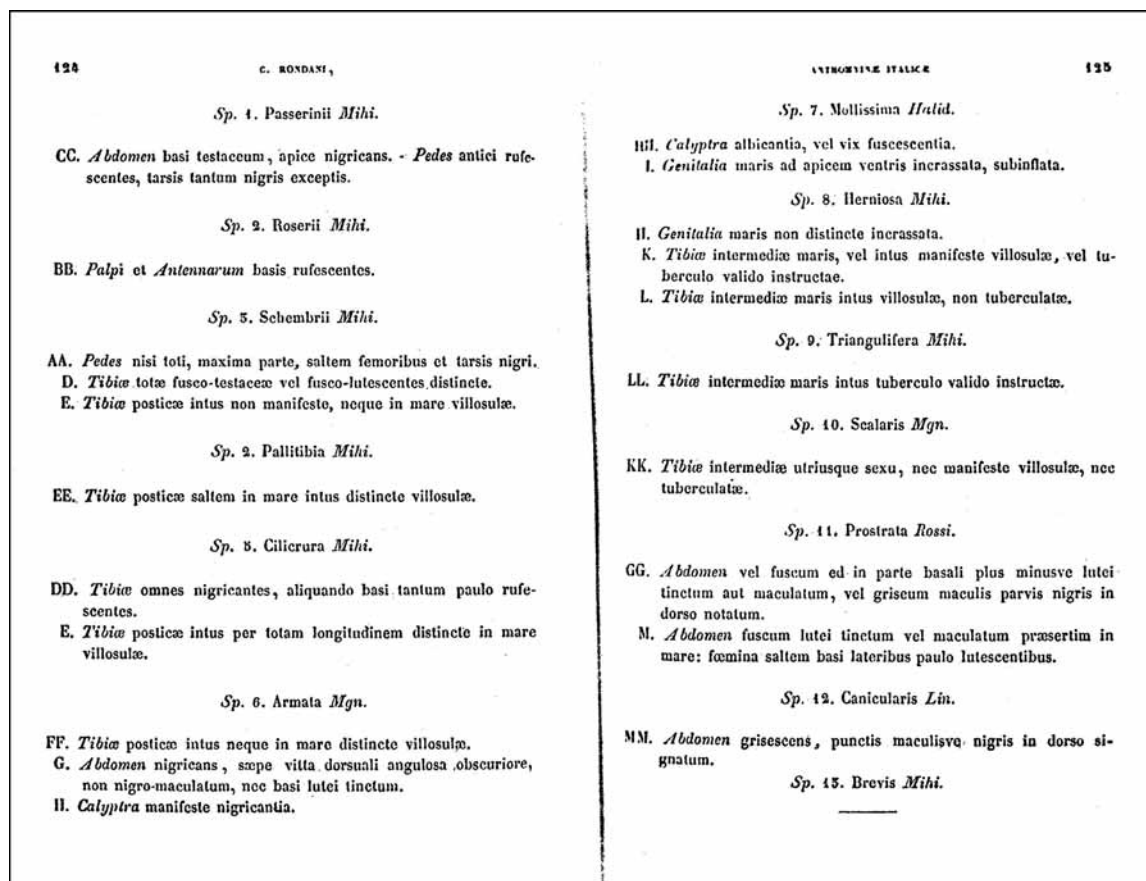
The term *mihi itch* has been with us in the jargon of taxonomy (most particularly in entomology) for quite some time and, for purposes of proper decorum, is mostly limited to personal conversations, lectures, or private correspondence. But its use occurs often enough that most listeners and recipients are quite clear as to what the connotations for it are. They are negative and it is a term usually cast towards those who have a combination of disregard for quality over quantity when describing new taxa and a demonstrably high ego. That ego and *mihi* are related is no coincidence since *mihi* is the dative of the Latin *ego*<sup>1</sup>. This ego (= in this case, authorship) problem, in whatever name or phrase it takes, has been discussed many times over the years with

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1. Another term used possibly more commonly than “*mihi*” in the context of a suffix used to denote new taxa is the Latin “*nobis*” (often abbreviated as “nob.”), which is the plural form (= “to us”) of “*mihi*” (= “to me”) but may well have been added by some authors who thought that it meant “new”. In any case, a derogatory phrase used with regard to a corresponding “*nobis*” affliction of a group of over-zealous taxonomists has not yet been found in the published literature.

some exemplary papers (e.g., Ng 1994; Pillon & Chase 2006) appearing more recently.

Ironically, despite the relative ubiquity of *mihi itch* in our scientific literature and the negative impacts to nomenclature, taxonomy, conservation, and others areas that it connotes, little or nothing has been done to research its origin, history, meaning, or how its usage has evolved over time. This paper attempts to rectify that with a brief history of it as well as that of a lesser-known synonym of *mihi itch*, namely, the German *Mihisucht*.



**FIGURE 1.** Facing pages of a 1866 article by dipterist Camillo Rondani replete with the use of “*mihi*” for his new species (from *Atti della Società Italiana di Scienze Naturali*, 9, 68–217).

## Mihi itch

To the unknowing, the term *mihi itch* conjures up an image of some sort of disease requiring possibly a salve, ointment, or other lotion to mitigate this “itch” of the “mihi”, wherever the latter may be located on the body. However, to the taxonomic cognoscenti, they know that no lotion will solve this “itch”. It is an itch that doesn’t physically exist but is instead a term used to explain a proclivity of some taxonomists to describe new taxa only for the desire to see their names, as authors of those new taxa, in print following the new name; or simply the desire to just name new taxa — the *mihi* being the Latin “to me, mine”, a term that at one time was placed after the scientific name in descriptions to denote it was a new taxon in that work and “belonged to me” or was new “to me” (i.e., the author of that work). Thus, when author Smith described a new taxon *A-us b-us*, its original description might have had the headline “*A-us b-us, Mihi*” (cf. Fig. 1 for an example of an unusually profuse use of the word in just two pages of a much larger work)

In order to properly understand the possible ramifications of the term in today’s taxonomic discussions, one needs to look into its history. The first question to be answered is who was the first to coin the term.

British dipterist Roger Crosskey (1983) posited that his entomologist colleague at the then British Museum (Natural History), David R. Ragge, had coined *mihi itch* and dated it to at least the year Crosskey had first heard Ragge use it: 1963. However, in a footnote to that article, Ragge was reluctant to commit to the fact that he was really the first, and he was correct. Crosskey was off by about 80 years.

Entomologist Philip P. Calvert, in his biography of North American coleopterist George Henry Horn, says of him (1898: xx):

“He possessed the salt of humor, and whether originator of the expression or not, introduced among us the phrase ‘*mihi-itch*’ to designate the condition of those whose ambition is chiefly to describe new species.”

Searching the literature, the earliest usage found in print is indeed by Horn in 1884<sup>2</sup> but not in reference to a proclivity of descriptions of new species. In *The Canadian Entomologist* (Anonymous 1884: 171), Horn responded to lepidopterist Dr. John G. Morris’s requests for comments regarding the increase in the number of genera at that time:

“... [according to the traditions laid down by Lacordaire] genera have no existence in nature and are created only for convenience in dividing up large masses of species to facilitate recognition. Nature has species only. Of late, however, persons afflicted with the *mihi itch*, finding new species scarce had taken to describing genera. For 12,000 species of Coleoptera some 2000 genera had been described.”<sup>3</sup>

As with most conversational phrases first seen in print, *mihi itch* was probably in use long before 1884. Since no one at the meeting seems to have been interested in asking Horn to define his term, that lends further credence to this presumption. And had this article not been the minutes of a meeting and the quoting of a conversation, the phrase probably would have been delayed from being in print even longer as it does not show up again until American entomologist Charles Henry Fernald (1895: 255) issued the following note about the lack of microlepidopterists in North America and the great open niche that lay awaiting use by overly eager taxonomists working on that group of insects: “North America is as yet a glorious country for those suffering of the *mihi itch*.”

In order to understand the reasons for Horn’s use of the phrase with respect to his complaint about so many beetle genera in North America, one needs to understand Horn. George Henry Horn (1840–1897) (Fig. 2) was probably one of the most respected coleopterists of his time, both within and outside his own country. He frowned on public debate and rarely was known to berate a colleague in public. It is ironic then that the coining of a clearly derogatory term would originate from one who refrained from personal conflict and general controversy.



FIGURE 2. George Henry Horn.

2. Corroborated by OED contributor and advisor Michael Quinion (pers. comm. 2008).

3. The numbers of beetles Horn quotes are close estimates but were well-known to him at the time since he had just published with John Le Conte the “Classification of the Coleoptera of North America” in which over 11,000 species in close to 2,000 genera were treated in detail by the two coleopterists.

Horn's taxonomy was almost beyond reproach, and this was no doubt due to careful and deliberate study of specimens while comparing them to types. Horn made it a point to travel to European museums, attend foreign entomological society meetings, and study type material firsthand. Further, according to Smith (1897), Horn claimed "there was no evidence that an insect was really suffering for want of a name and that no wrong would be done to it by postponing the christening for a brief period." Apparently then, to Horn, the description of so many genera of North American beetles was a wanton disregard for quality through diligence of study over time. Thus, in his 1884 comment that made it to print and became the first usage of *mihi itch*, he aimed his term not at any one person but to coleopterists as a group.

At the same 1884 meeting attended by Horn and Morris, arachnologist Dr. Henry McCook responded to Horn, but this time with regard to species: "... in ants and spiders there is plenty of opportunity for persons afflicted with that *itch*, as there was a very large unworked field there and plenty of new forms."

The term obviously caught hold over the next decade, although not appearing in print very much. When writing about Horn, Smith (1897) himself used it with regard to over-splitting of species names: "To be recognized, a species must be described and named, and in entomology, especially, there is a great field for one afflicted by the *mihi itch*."

Entomologist Herman Strecker (1900: 602–603) gave an eloquent quote in the November 1900 issue of *Entomological News* that epitomized the feeling of one school of taxonomists regarding the apparent knee-jerk reactions to creating new taxa:

"Are genera labels of classification, matters of opinion, matters of caprice, or emanations of the '*mihi itch*'? We fear that their utility is being lost sight of, and that caprice, or the '*mihi itch*,' is having much to do with their formation. It looks as though we are rapidly approaching the time when we will have a genus for every species, and then we may conveniently abolish the binomial nomenclature. If this comes to pass what will the '*mihi itch*' fellows do? Oh! horror of horrors! perhaps entomologists will lose their heads, like some of the bird and mammal men, and give us infinite divisions of species and varieties. Just imagine an entomologist sitting on a high stool in the Department of Agriculture and trying to compete with the mammalogists in grinding out binomials and quadrinomials and describing individuals from some one's fence corner. An experience of many years has shown that a multiplicity of genera is only confusing to the student and beginner, and they fight shy of works thus burdened. The condition of affairs in regard to genera was tersely put in a recent publication and reads as follows: 'For this (use of genera) almost everyone has his own various, original, adopted, or modified views; generic division being merely artificial, only a matter of convenience for grouping, not abiding, continually liable to be changed, and continually being changed, consequently not only of minor importance, but, when carried to extremes, a great evil, a hindrance to the student, an actual bar to the beginner. It is only by the specific name that we know the insect; with this knowledge the rest is attainable'".

A flurry of notes in *Science* found their way into print shortly after 1905 after the *Règles* (of Zoological Nomenclature) appeared prompting discussion of nomenclatural and taxonomic terms and their delimitations and also what constituted a "species". One such note was by American ornithologist John S. Kingsley (1900: 114–115):

"For thirty years I have been looking for fixity in zoological names, but that desirable condition seems further off than ever. It is all very well to indulge in these antiquarian researches, these games of taxonomic logomachy, if they be recognized as such, but the players fail to realize one thing: Names of animals and plants are but means for easy reference; nomenclature is not the end and object of all biological science. The sanest word in all this discussion has, in my opinion, been said by Dr. Williston. This digging up of forgotten screeds means but the relegating of the great masters of the past to a secondary position; this framing of ex post facto laws offers a precedent for the future subject of that intolerable disease once known as the '*mihi itch*' to set aside as lightly the laborious schemes of the sciolists of to-day. Biologists may apparently be divided into two groups: One contains those who find great enjoyment in renaming things already well named! and who regard names as the object of all science. The other group have something to tell us about animals and plants and they regard names merely as means of identification of the forms referred to."

Not long after this, dipterist Samuel Wendell Williston (1908: 185) quipped:

“... possibly they might undertake to name their own species, for I have seldom known the morphologist to escape the *mihi itch* on very slight infection.”

The problem of perceived narcissicism in taxonomy does not seem to have dissipated when a few decades later, a rather testy exchange between Cornell University professor J. Chester Bradley (later to become president of the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature) and ornithologist (and sometime entomologist) Waldo Lee McAtee ensued. Bradley (1927: 103) responded to a single phrase in McAtee’s (1926b) editorial about taxonomists setting up a monument to posterity with the following:

“Taxonomy has suffered too much in the past and fallen too far into disrepute, from the petty work of persons infected with the “*mihi itch*.” Were it not a bibliographical necessity—or so considered—it would be far better to not cite the name of an author in conjunction with a scientific name and to forget who proposed it. At least the sooner it is understood, the better off we will be, that we do not include the name of the author as part of the formal name of an organism in order to give him “credit,” but as a matter of bibliographic record. If it must come to a question of a monument to posterity, there are those who would prefer to leave taxonomic work that would win the approbation of specialists for its sound judgment of phylogenetic relationships, for its scholarliness and helpfulness, even though it never proposed a new name, than to have coined names for a thousand genera and species, each flaunting the describer’s name like a waving ensign to dazzle the uninitiated, who may not know how easy and insignificant a thing it is to propose a new name or describe an avowedly new form.”

Although Bradley makes an interesting point about not citing an author’s name after a taxon so as to avoid “credit” (which in itself is one aspect of publishing [the requirement by many journals to put the author’s name after the first mention of a genus- or species-group name in the text] that may well have had an effect on inadvertently promoting the *mihi itch*), ironically, Bradley missed McAtee’s earlier editorial (1926a) in which McAtee clearly was against unnecessary and superfluous names and his note harks back to Horn’s original lament on the increasing numbers of beetle genera:

“If we cannot place all sex forms of an insect in their proper genera on structural characters, then we have too many genera. Recognition as genera, of groups of species allied in color pattern, and regardless of affinities in structure, is puerile, and all multiplication of genera for its own sake is highly undesirable. The inevitable product of such a process in monomial nomenclature, and it is safe to say that no one is going to be hailed as a second Linnaeus for urging such a nomenclature or anything approaching it.”

All of the above relegate the term *mihi itch* to an obvious negative connotation. The only reference found in print that refers to it in the positive is a short quote from entomologist James M. Needham (1930: 27) in his treatise on the naming of taxa and scientific names in general, where he is responding to the then recently proposed lengthy scientific names *Brachyuropuchkydermatogammarus grewinglii mnemonotus* Dybowsky and *Microstomaticoichthyoborus bashford-deani* Dybowsky<sup>4</sup>:

“Let the splitters have their revel. The *mihi itch* is such a delightful disease, I would by no means deprive my worthy systematic colleagues of the pleasure they find in scratching. But let us have simpler names for common use.”

Possibly Needham was raising the white flag to those overly zealous taxonomists and was merely asking for a rational compromise.

One last example is that the usage of *mihi itch* seems not to have been limited to just taxonomists. Roscoe (1954: 182) complained that ecologists desiring common names for scientific names and replacing his

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4. These names by Dybowsky were eventually suppressed by the I.C.Z.N.

proposed names for their own may have contracted the “disease”: “Perhaps it is only another clinical expression of the disease once regarded as endemic to systematists— the *mihi itch*.”

Although implied, Horn’s coinage of the term as well as Strecker’s and Kingsley’s subsequent quotes make no reference to what the *itch* may be metaphorically, but the usage by McCook, Roscoe, Smith, and Williston, all explicitly claim it to be an “affliction” or a “disease”.

With that information now in hand, perhaps the next question is: is there an even older use of the phrase in another language or possibly another similar phrase, possibly referring to this affliction?

## Mihisucht

Conveniently, the same journal that initiated the search for the oldest usage of *mihi itch* is also the source of a possible predecessor to the *mihi itch*. Pape (1993), in his article responding to Crosskey’s (1983) note on *mihi itch*, questions whether the German “*Mihisucht*” might be that predecessor.

Pape defines the German noun “Sucht” as a disease often used in the context of a “morbid inclination, craze, or mania”. So the use of the term is clearly synonymous with *mihi itch* and the implied morbidity even harks back to Macleay’s (1838) less concise phraseology. Pape was able to trace the use of *Mihisucht* back to a vehement exchange between two European zoologists some 65 years earlier. Danish echinoderm specialist Theodor Mortensen (1929) had accused the Latvian zoologist Embrik Strand of proposing scientific names for slightly aberrant specimens and even suggested that Strand’s replacement names be suppressed because of the “harm and injustice” they were causing. Strand (1930) was duly indignant and responded that Mortensen was suppressing Strand’s replacement names only so that he could rename them himself: “Die *Mihisucht* in Reinkulture bei Herrn Mortensen!”

Pape was indeed correct that *Mihisucht* was the predecessor of *mihi itch*, but, as with Crosskey’s date of origin being errant, Pape’s date of origin (i.e., 1930) was a bit off the mark as well. Research in this study traced the oldest known published use of *Mihisucht* back to the German coleopterist Ernst Gustav Kraatz (1831–1909) (Fig. 3) in his lengthy complaint in the *Wiener Entomologische Zeitung* (Kraatz 1862: 63) about the “vanity” taxonomy of his Russian contemporary Viktor Ivanovitch Motschulsky:

“Erfüllen wir eine Pflicht gegen die Wissenschaft, die H. v. M[otschulsky] zur Befriedigung seiner unbegrenzten Autoreitelkeit und Mihisucht missbraucht, wenn wir gewissenhaft die wenigen Körner der M.’schen Arbeitsspreu sammeln, seine Arten und Gattungen deuten, um dafür von ihm geschmäht zu werden, oder erfüllen wir eine Pflicht gegen uns selbst, wenn wir ihn in seinen Etudes zu seinem Privatvergnügen drucken lassen, was er will und die entomologischen Zeit- und Vereinsschriften rein von seinen Arbeiten halten, weil wir ihren Werth kennen gelernt haben?”

[Do we fulfill a duty towards science, which H. v. M[otschulsky] abuses for the satisfaction of his boundless authorial vanity and *Mihisucht*, if we conscientiously collect the few grains from among the chaff of M.’s work, interpret his species and genera, only to be reviled by him for doing so; or do we fulfill a duty towards ourselves, if we allow him to print in his Etudes what he wants and for his private satisfaction, and [thereby] keep the entomological journals and society publications free from his works, because we have recognized their value?]



FIGURE 3. Ernst Gustav Kraatz.

It is no surprise that Kraatz would attack Motschulsky as there was a movement in Europe in the mid 1800s toward quality control in taxonomic descriptions (Wessel 2007), and the authors of poorly described species would not be immune to attacks by colleagues in print in European scientific journals. Although hav-

ing obtained his doctoral degree only five years earlier (1857), the young Kraatz was a dynamic force in German entomology at that time and, as the new editor of the *Deutsche Entomologische Zeitschrift*, which prided itself in adhering to high standards in taxonomy, probably felt that he spoke for many of his colleagues when he published his editorials on various individuals and their work.

Motschulsky, primarily a coleopterist, was the subject of many attacks by colleagues, as was his contemporary in England, Francis Walker. Motschulsky had privately published a number of volumes of his “Études entomologiques” with numerous newly described taxa that were thought by some to have been founded on dubious grounds. This became the fodder for many of Kraatz’s editorials and critiques. Walker was also criticized for his brief and often vague descriptions for thousands of new genera and species in various orders of insects; and even notices of his death were laden with blatant disrespect [e.g., an unsigned obituary (by J.T. Carrington) in *The Entomologist’s Monthly Magazine* (1874: 140–141) noted “More than twenty years too late for his scientific reputation, and after having done an amount of injury to entomology almost inconceivable in its immensity, Francis Walker has passed from among us.”]. Although his critics have used other terms to vilify his taxonomy, no one has ever accused Walker, in print anyway, of having had the *mihi itch* or *Mihisucht*.

Despite a free usage of *Mihisucht* by Kraatz in critical reviews of the papers of contemporaries (e.g., Kraatz 1862, 1872, 1878), subsequent usage of the term by others is not as prevalent in the literature as *mihi itch* but does show up here and there in passages reviewing the perceived poor taxonomy of others. For example, Schaufuss (1889) Hubenthal (1909), and Heikertinger (1916) used it in their respective disparaging remarks of colleagues’ taxonomic methodology.

Ironically, although Pape (1993) traced the first use of *Mihisucht* back to Strand in 1930, that instance might have instead been one of the last, for the term seems to have fallen into disuse in the mid-1930s; whereas *mihi itch* continues to be found in print, although infrequently, as recently [aside from Pape’s article] as the 1990s (e.g., Mathis, 1991).

## Evolution of meaning and impact

The term *mihi itch*, with us now for over 120 years, is still found in our conversational lexicon, if not as frequently in print, but its meaning has changed over time and its usage sometimes gets confused with another term, *splitter*<sup>5</sup>.

Horn’s original use of *mihi itch* in 1884 was in context with the perceived over-inflation of beetle genus-group names. Although it quickly was used to also convey a graphic disapproval of those who described numerous species-group names with little concern for the quality of those names, some adhered to the original use of it for only genus-group names. However, whether the use of the term is directed to those who propose genus-group names or those who propose species-group names, the derogatory inference of an overblown ego (seeing one’s name in print after a name as a form of “ownership”) has persisted virtually unchanged (save for the sole positive reference by Needham above). That the term has been used to convey a disparaging view only of those who have abused the privilege of naming species through neglect of diligence or quality of descriptions is evident in the fact two of the most prolific describers in entomology, Edward Meyrick (some 20,000 names of Lepidoptera) and C.P. Alexander (over 10,000 names of Diptera), have to my knowledge never been labeled as suffering from the *mihi itch*.

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5. Not to be confused with the derogatory connotation it sometimes gets. There are two schools of taxonomy: *lumpers* and *splitters*. Simply put, those who find characters that distinguish two species are *splitters*; those who find characters that synonymize those two species are *lumpers*. Most taxonomists are a mix of both: describing new forms as they are found and synonymizing others that have been previously described.

Attaching an author's name to a scientific name is not officially a part of the scientific name [according the *Codes of nomenclature for plants and animals* (McNeill *et al.* 2006 and I.C.Z.N. 1999, respectively)] but it is required in order to associate the name with the original bibliographic reference of that name. Some taxonomists see this requirement as a sort of "ownership" of the scientific name being proposed. It is human nature to want to own things: at a minimum, it is merely our own name; but taken to the other extreme it can fulfill the capitalistic mantra "We are what we own". At that extreme, this perceived scientific-name "ownership" can be abused to the point of becoming akin to the yuppie motto of the 1980s found on bumper stickers and silk-screened onto T-shirts: "He who dies with the most toys wins".

Over-zealous taxonomists and/or those with improper training who name plants and animals solely for the desire to see their own names in print unfortunately have the potential to create a consequential undesirable "noise" in the taxonomic atmosphere that would eventually need to be dealt with by others to clean up the mess of resultant subjective synonyms and provide users with a more "refined" slate of names.

Despite its negative connotations, we must be reminded that the *mihi itch* is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it serves to remind us that the science of taxonomy and recognizing new species is indeed subjective and can be taken to unconstructive and egotistical extremes. But on the other hand, taxonomy being a science, all new species that are proposed in those "extremes" are hypotheses that can be refuted and falsified. With a mandate to help solve the taxonomic impediment and describe the earth's biota before it is no longer there to describe, there exists a huge number of new species that await description and no doubt many taxonomists now and in the future will each be describing large numbers of new species with their surnames affixed to each. Whether their resulting efforts are disparaged by colleagues as simply the effects of the *mihi itch* or are lauded by them for helping complete the passenger manifest of Spaceship Earth will be left to future generations of taxonomists to decide.

### **Concluding safety warning**

Recent open-source online technology and peer-reviewed journals have reduced the *mihi itch* to a minimum but it still exists today only because there are no regulations in the existing nomenclatural rules requiring peer-review in order for a publication to be considered valid. Peer-review without censorship remains an optimal approach to the proper vetting of new hypotheses including proposals of new taxa. Collegial feedback and assistance in correcting inadvertent errors is often an essential part of the publication process. However, the Motschulsky-style ("it's all about me"), guerilla-style ("us little guys will show them big guys"), and even anarchistic-style ("to hell with the ICZN!") vanity publications still appear in print today and have the potential to not only cause taxonomic "noise", but may also mislead readers to depend on inaccurate identifications, the reliance of which can have adverse impacts in many areas such as biological control, conservation activities, and environmental policy.

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vided the Macleay quote that is leagues better than the one I had originally included and allowed a segway to the history of *mihi itch*; and also suggested the “double-edged sword” corollary. The libraries and their staff of the National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C. and the Bishop Museum, Honolulu are thanked for assistance in obtaining relevant literature. Searching of the content of digitized scientific articles online made this project possible but must be associated with the caveat that the literature searching that was done was only as good as the online literature available. Earlier usage of *Mihisucht* may well predate the 1862 article, but until reference to an earlier usage is found, Gustav Kraatz may be credited with having coined that term.

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