



Nomenclatural itch *versus* patrolling itch: comments on O’Hara (2011)

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In the last years there have been renewed criticisms towards those who, theoretically, abuse of naming new taxa, supposedly with the only (or main) objective of having their names associated to the nomina of these taxa and, thus, being ‘immortalized’ (Pillon & Chase 2007¹; Dubois 2008; Evenhuis 2008). As Evenhuis (2008) has carefully shown, however, this kind of criticism is almost as old as taxonomy itself and those erecting supposedly unnecessary nomina are often considered to be suffering the *mihi itch* (‘mihi’ is the Latin for ‘to me’, alluding to an egotistical affliction). In fact, even Linnaeus has been later indirectly accused of being afflicted by the *mihi itch*: “It has often been pointed out that Linnaeus had no idea of a principle of priority. Indeed, he was in no moral position to hold any such idea, engaged as he was in rejecting nearly all existing names of species” (Melville 1995: 5) and, of course, giving them nomina of his own.

Pillon & Chase (2007) and Dubois (2008) attributed to the *mihi itch* the cause of a significant number of junior synonyms in plant and animal taxa, respectively. Dubois (2008) went still further and even proposed a change in the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (hereafter the “Code”) with the clear aim of discouraging ‘amateurs’ of erecting new nomina. According to Dubois (2008), “synonymy is a burden for biodiversity studies because the recognition, demonstration, and publication of a new nomen as a junior synonym requires special work and wastes much of the limited time available to taxonomists”. Thus, Dubois’s (2008) admittedly radical solution to this problem would be the total suppression of any mention to the name of the author of a given taxon in any work (and replace it by the date only). Although I do sympathize with Pillon & Chase (2007), Dubois (2008) and others’ concerns, I disagree with Dubois’s (2008) proposition due to reasons that will be better explained elsewhere.

Following the new wave of ‘mihi itchers’ hunting, O’Hara (2011) recently published a criticism to what he termed “cyber nomenclaturalists” and focused his criticism to a particular pair of Turkish entomologists for reasons explained in detail in his paper. I do sympathize with the essence of O’Hara’s criticisms, but I think this “hunting” is going too far and, especially, it seems too biased to me. Some considerations are needed to bring some equilibrium to the debate.

First of all, it is important to distinguish between the focus of Pillon & Chase (2007) and Dubois’s (2008) criticisms, on one hand, and O’Hara’s (2011), on the other. Pillon & Chase (2007) and Dubois (2008) were especially referring to ‘amateurs’ (defined by Dubois as individuals who are not paid by any institution for their taxonomic work) who describe unnecessary “new species”, whereas O’Hara’s (2011) targets are “cyber nomenclaturalists” who are especially interested in re-naming nomina of the genus-group, looking for junior homonyms to replace them by nomina nova under article 52 of the Code. I will here only deal with O’Hara’s (2011) criticisms.

Are “cyber nomenclaturalists” wrong?

As O’Hara (2011: 57) clearly explained, “cyber nomenclaturalists” scour the internet for lists and databases containing seemingly valid generic names that potentially have junior primary homonyms lurking in their midst. The cyber nomenclaturalist diligently checks each and every “valid” generic nomen against a nomenclator in the hope of discovering senior primary homonyms that predate “valid” generic nomina. Then, invoking the Principle of Homonymy (article 52 of the Code), new replacement names are published to take the place of the preoccupied names. According to O’Hara (2011: 59), “papers devoted primarily to the establishment of new replacement names are commonly viewed as inappropriate, opportunistic, and not entirely ethical”. This latter statement constitutes another major difference between previous attacks to “mihi itchers” and O’Hara’s criticisms. Pillon & Chase (2007), Dubois (2008) and all critics listed by Evenhuis (2008) attributed the exaggerated profusion of unnecessary nomina erected by the “mihi itchers” mostly to their lack of competence. O’Hara (2011) attributed it, at least partially, to their lack of honesty.

1. Dubois (2008) and Evenhuis (2008) listed Pillon & Chase’s paper as published in 2006. In fact, its date of publication is 2007.