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SHORT NOTE

Vandalism in Taxonomy

Terrorism, extremism, hooliganism, vandalism, and the like are definitely on the rise worldwide. Even in taxonomy, an otherwise very peaceful branch of science, we can witness an increase of aggression culminating in verbal and even physical abuse by fellow taxonomists.

About 17 years ago, Dewanand Makhan began to publish taxonomic papers on various animal groups, without paying regard to proper descriptions or to already published species, thereby playing havoc with the nomenclature of these groups (especially Coleoptera). The devastating effects of his papers remained rather unnoticed for several years, because the number of described species was low and the group he mainly worked on was more or less “orphaned” at that time. Only later, when he described larger numbers of new species and ill-defined new genera, coleopterists became increasingly alarmed realizing the irreversible harm that was done to nomenclature.

Consequently, several colleagues from all over the world sought contact with Makhan (by phone and email) frankly offering him professional help and cooperation (e.g. friendly reviews of his manuscripts, coauthorship). Instead of being thankful to those who had approached him in a very polite and constructive manner, Makhan turned unexpectedly aggressive and even enforced his unprofessional taxonomic activities.

In addition, he started a funny business by selling a fake monograph at € 300.- (see p. 88, and Jäch 2006: Taxonomy and nomenclature threatened by D. Makhan. – Koleopterologische Rundschau 76: 360), and by offering four beetle larvae at € 120.000.- (email sent by D. Makhan to M. Fikáček, Charles University, Prague, on December 14, 2004: „I shell [sell] 1 *Hydrochus carinatus*, 1 *Hydrochus elongatus*, 1 *Rishihydrius brevis* and 1 *Rishihydrius* for 120.000 Euro. For you the price is low, normal[ly] I ask 5 times more. I hope that your department want[s] it“).

A letter of protest, signed by more than 120 (!) scientists was sent to the authorities of the Utrecht University (The Netherlands) in 2006 in order to inquire about the status of their salient employee. In their response, it was made clear that 1) Makhan was neither a doctor (although he had usually signed as such), and that 2) “Mr. Makhan’s tasks at Utrecht University were strictly in the realm of wood anatomy, and, even there, not in the science of it but the technical support” (see letter from Utrecht University, p. 60).

When confronted with this kind of massive protest, Makhan totally lost control over himself and sent disgusting emails (see p. 146) to a number of taxonomists, thereby insulting even a very famous deceased coleopterist († 2000) who had dared to synonymise all the hydrochid genera established by Makhan: „he was so fat, food was more important than science“! It can be inferred from Makhan’s letters that he plans to continue his intentionally destabilizing work just in order to annoy fellow taxonomists („Makhanian Vandalism“).

Regrettably, Makhan is not the only black sheep in taxonomy. There are reports about some Australian scientists with similarly crude manners, at some point even surpassing Makhan in their inclination to aggression.

The question, whether Makhan and his Australian companions are mentally disturbed in the medical sense shall not be a matter of debate here. One thing has decidedly been proven in the case of the family Hydrochidae (Coleoptera): a single person can easily corrupt the nomenclature of larger groups of animals by publishing intentionally detrimental taxonomic articles, thereby creating sustained instability.

The International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN) currently does not include any article, which would effectively prevent such a severe case of taxonomic vandalism currently accomplished by D. Makhan.

Without doubt, taxonomy is facing a growing threat since it has become very easy to publish large papers in one of the numerous unreviewed private journals, that have been established in the last 10 years. Can the ICZN afford to accept all these devastating journals in the future? Will they bring about the downfall of conventional taxonomy? Of course, this cannot be predicted at present. But in any case, it is sure that Makhanian Vandalism may throw back the nomenclature of entire families for decades or even centuries, a fact, which the ICZN is supposed to fight by all means.

The editors

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