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Scientists Should Stop Naming Species after Awful People

And they ought to consider revoking names that never should have been honored in the first place

By David Shiffman on November 8, 2019



Yes, there really is a beetle named for Adolf Hitler. Credit: Michael Munich *Wikimedia* (CC BY-SA 3.0)

The last few years have seen the rise of a thought-provoking civic discourse on who we as a society should publicly honor, resulting in (among other things) the removal of statues from parks (including statues of scientists)) and the renaming of schools. Though bad-faith critics claim that such actions are about “erasing history,” they’re really about a simple question: which figures from our history and culture represent values to which we should all aspire... and which do not? So far, these important discussions have largely not reached a scientific discipline whose practitioners regularly make the choice of which people to publicly honor: taxonomy.

Taxonomists may name a newly-described species after a person for a variety of reasons, including recognizing that person’s role in discovering that species, acknowledging someone for a longstanding contribution to their field or showing respect to someone unrelated to the field but who the scientist personally likes. There are also scientists who auction off species naming rights to fund their science, and even those who name species after people to insult them. Though some taxonomists may dispute this characterization, in many cases naming a species after someone is choosing to publicly honor that person—it is certainly widely perceived that way.

I'm no taxonomist, but as a member of my professional society's equity and diversity committee, my colleagues and I spend a lot of time discussing changes we can make to the day to day operations of scientific research that will help make academia more inclusive, welcoming, and just. To that end, I pose the following questions: should scientists be publicly honoring people who have committed human rights violations or other horrific crimes? And what can and should be done about species already named after such monsters?

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Two recent examples brought this important and underdiscussed issue to my attention. At the opening of 2019's Joint Meeting of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists in Snowbird, local host committee co-chair Al Savitsky of Utah State University told us about a local reptile with an inglorious common name: the common small-blotched lizard. These lizards have some unusual reproductive behaviors that have attracted the interest of herpetologists, but for the purpose of this essay let's just consider their scientific name: *Uta stansburiana*, named in 1852. They are named after Howard Stansbury, an explorer in the Army Corps of Engineers who led a famous expedition to study the flora and fauna of what's now Utah and collected the type specimens of this lizard. By the standards of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature, the formal scientific body involved in species names, naming a species after an explorer who collected the first specimens of a species is not only appropriate, but fairly standard. However, while Stansbury was an influential naturalist, he was also a terrible person—he was a vocal supporter of and played a key role in a locally-infamous massacre of Timpanogos Native Americans in which more than 100 were killed.

In the resulting discussion, I learned of a recent hullabaloo in the bird taxonomy world: the 1851 naming of a bird species after Confederate general John P. McCown, who was also involved in several atrocities against Native American tribes and would later (after the bird was named after him) become a leader in the fight to uphold chattel slavery in the U.S.

Experts in diversity, equity, and inclusion in STEM regularly discuss how lots of things that members of a majority demographic take for granted signal to historically underrepresented minority groups that they're not welcome in the academy. What message does it send to prospective scientists from a Native American background that we honor people like Stansbury by naming a species after him? What message does it send to prospective scientists of African-American descent that we so honor people like McCown? It certainly isn't a message of inclusivity and welcome. (This is hardly the worst thing to ever happen to Native Americans or African Americans, which doesn't mean that it's not a problem worth discussing and trying to fix; "death by a thousand cuts" and "the straw that broke the camels back" are clichés for a reason).

Stansbury and McCown are far from the only historically problematic figures who scientists have honored with a species name. There's even a beetle named after Adolf Hitler, and specimens have become a collectible item among neo-Nazis to the point that it's actually affecting wild populations of the species. These are just a handful of examples of a widespread problem that we're just not talking about enough.

So what can we do about it? We're already changing problematic common names—in my field (marine biology) we've decided that we should rename the Jewfish, whose unclear origin story likely involved various anti-Semitic stereotypes, to the Goliath Grouper. Also, in response to the bird species named after a Confederate general, the American Ornithological Society has stated that they'll consider renaming species named after especially awful humans in rare cases (see section D here).

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Currently, there is no procedure under ICZN rules to change the scientific name of a species because that species is named after someone whose crimes against humanity offend the modern conscience, and the taxonomists I spoke to for this essay told me that they don't see this changing anytime soon. This is perhaps something that we should think about; after all, "there's no way to do this under the current rules" doesn't mean it can't or shouldn't be done. At the very least, however, we should probably consider no longer naming *new* species after awful humans from this point forward.

As with any technical policy, the devil is in the details. I'll leave the delineation of where exactly the line is to people smarter and wiser than I am, while noting that the argument of "it's not fair to judge people of history by the moral standards of today" ignores that there were large numbers of people who opposed those awful actions at the time. I'll also note that it's important that we don't use any new rules to further discriminate against people of color or other historically underrepresented groups.

But surely we can all agree that there are some things that are so outside the boundaries of what is morally acceptable that if you do them, you shouldn't be publicly honored with a species named after you—even if you find a new beetle in between your murders of large numbers of people because of their race or religion? Surely saying that genocide and slavery is bad is not political correctness run amok?

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Taxonomists have a role to play in who society decides to publicly honor, which is a small but real contributor to problems with diversity, equity, and inclusion in STEM. While there are plenty of awful people who this rule would disqualify from being honored with a species eponym there is no shortage of excellent people or basic biological descriptions we could name species after.

We can even honor the millennia-old Indigenous names for the “new” species that we “discover,” recognizing that a species newly described by Western science is not necessarily a species that no humans have ever seen or talked about. There are possible solutions to this problem, but step one is admitting that we have a problem. A decision to no longer publicly honor human rights violators would contribute to making STEM more welcoming to people from historically underrepresented groups.

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