

**Biodiversity data are out of local taxonomists' reach**  
**Letter published in Nature, 26 January, 2006**

SIR — Exchange of information about biodiversity is mandated by the legally binding international Convention on Biological Diversity, as are monitoring and benefit sharing. Yet researchers in the developing world, where most of the biodiversity is found, are unable to access much of this information. This impedes the monitoring of biodiversity: monitoring depends on the proper identification of species, and this is hindered by a lack of both specialists and access to relevant taxonomic information.

The number of online publications with taxonomic content is increasing, and online tools are becoming available to mash up taxonomic with other information, for example at [ispecies.org](http://ispecies.org) (see “Mashups mix data into global service” *Nature* 439, 6–7; 2006). But copyright and high costs put this information beyond the reach of many in the developing world—which is home to more than 95% of species whose descriptions have been published. More than half the 1,600 descriptions of new ant species published in the past ten years are copyrighted, for example, but none are in journals published in the developing world (see [antbase.org](http://antbase.org)).

This seems little better than biopiracy: taking biodiversity material from the developing world for profit, without sharing benefit or providing the people who live there with access to this crucial information.

A simple solution would be to treat species descriptions as we do gene sequences, and have them openly accessible. Open-access descriptions of new species could then be a mandatory factor in making them valid under the various codes of biological nomenclature. A recent Commentary by Andrew Polaszek and colleagues (“A universal register for animal names” *Nature* 437, 477; 2005) describes how the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature proposes to facilitate this process for animal descriptions, through a register called ZooBank. However, present copyright laws prevent the mandatory inclusion of what would be an immensely useful piece of information, the actual description of the species.

Donat Agosti

American Museum of Natural History, New York, New York 10024-5192, USA