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References Cited


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Topic

Should Type Specimens of Insects Indigenous to One Country but Housed in Another be Returned to Their Country of Origin?

BACKGROUND

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The International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN 1985) contains little information on type specimen deposition, stating only that type specimens must be available to the scientific community. Only neotypes must be deposited in a public repository. All other types (e.g., holotypes, paratypes, lectotypes) may be deposited in an institution of the author's choice. It is the biological community, including taxonomists, that would be affected most by changes in the location of type specimens. However, one also must consider political/governmental implications and practical issues of implementation, especially if repatriation is to be retroactive. The following debate will address not only academic concerns but also important political and economic elements related to the location of type specimens.

As biodiversity increasingly becomes a commodity, the issue of its ownership must be addressed. Who owns the biodiversity of a given region or country? What does this ownership mean? In reference to ownership, type specimens can be viewed (1) as representative of a species, (2) as a physical specimen, and (3) as the bearer of a proposed name. Which of these facets is emphasized has strong bearings on ownership. When governments possess species within their borders, they could lay claim to types representing endemic species. Widespread or migratory species are problematic. As physical specimens, type material collected from a country also could be claimed. However, a type specimen's primary value is as the bearer of a particular name, an attribute given to the particular specimen by the describing author. As such, claims of ownership could be made by the author or the author's country.

Economically, the issue of where type specimens are deposited involves the potential benefits of ownership balanced by the costs of maintenance and accessibility. Type specimens are more valuable to museums than nontype material. This is illustrated by the U.S. government's policy of granting tax write-offs for the donation of specimens to public museums. A tax write-off of $290.00 is given for the donation of a holotype, whereas nontype material of the same species receives only $3.00. Institutions do not profit directly from their type specimens. Rather, the types increase the scientific importance of a museum's holdings thereby affecting the museum's ability to acquire governmental funding, private endowments, and additional donations of specimens.

Museums with many type specimens (e.g., British Museum) receive hundreds of visitors annually who stay in local hotels, eat in local restaurants, and use local transportation. This economic influx, negligible in large cities, could be substantial in developing countries with weaker economies. However, economic benefits must be weighed against the high costs of maintaining a sound and environmentally stable building to protect type specimens, other materials, cabinets, drawers, and insect pins. Further, curators must be hired to monitor specimens for dampness, mold, and insect damage. Protection against theft and vandalism also must be considered. Museums that ship specimens to researchers also will have to pay for packaging material, person-hours to prepare and register loan material, and postage. Questions as to the ability of particular countries to meet these demands are real. The stability of local governments as well as economic support for institutions housing collections cannot be taken for granted.

Superimposed over national and institutional interests are the interests of individual taxonomists. Repatriation of type material would not affect all taxonomists equally because it would affect monographic, phylogenetic, and faunistic studies unequally. Monographic revisions and phylogenetic