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## A PLEA TO LET STABILITY TAKE PRECEDENCE OVER PRIORITY WHERE DESIRABLE, REASONABLE, AND POSSIBLE FOR GENERIC NAMES

C. G. G. J. van Steenis (Leiden)

Since I joined, a dozen years ago, the Subcommittee dealing with conservation of generic names of Phanerogams, I have had the privilege of experiencing the interpretation and practical application of Article 14 of the Code by the various members of the successive Subcommittees. This article, hitherto the sole basis or guiding line for our work, reads in the present Code:

*"In order to avoid disadvantageous changes in the nomenclature of genera, families, and intermediate taxa entailed by the strict application of the Rules, and especially of the principle of priority in starting from the dates given in Art. 13, this Code provides . . . lists of names that are conserved . . . and must be retained as exceptions. These names are preferably such as have come into general use in the fifty years following their publication."*

This interpretation has varied enormously. At one time there was a member who almost consistently voted against conservation because, as he said, "it defeats priority". And certainly, priority being expressed in a principle, viz Principle III, and conservation merely in an article, viz Article 14, he could to a certain degree defend his interpretation. Another member "would not sustain conservation of any small genus with less than 10 species". Though not specifically laid down in Art. 14, he derived his conclusion from Art. 14 where it is stated that conserved names must be retained as "exceptions", and, in fact, the majority usually rejected conservation of names of small genera. Another member wrote in an interim report: "In my opinion conservation is against priority, so I reject all the conservations made only for taxonomists. These may learn the new names created by their own laws. I agree only with conservation for plant names much used by non-botanists". As a matter of fact, in the argumentation of proposals there is always special stress laid on the use of plants for strengthening the argument for conservation, obviously because botanists feel "guilty" towards the applied sciences for changing names, and that often unnecessarily!

Each of the above interpretations can be defended by reference to some words or passages of Art. 14, in proportion to stress laid on certain aspects of it.

Nobody is then to blame; the vague circumscription of the conditions for conservation in Art. 14 invites such very wide diverging opinions by not being explicit.

This is manifestly unsatisfactory and in the past years there has been in several working groups in Africa and Asia uneasiness about rejection of some proposals for conservation. Complaints sometimes led to a reconsideration of rejected proposals under pressure (a few examples: *Enneastemon*, *Malachium*, *Moghania*, *Piliostigma*, *Schima*). Garay & Schultes openly ridiculed the conservation of names of small genera (Bot. Mus. Leaflet 18: 181) and illegally took up a name which was under consideration. There are more signs of rebellion; this should not occur, but seems inevitable if our policy proceeds as it does now.

I am not at all against freedom and diversity of opinion — how could I be, as a taxonomist? However, there is the unfortunate vagueness of Art. 14, our guiding light, the silence about conservation in Principle III of the Code prescribing priority, but again, the fact that in the Preamble the principle of priority is immediately followed by: "*Next in importance is the avoidance of the useless creation of names*", clearly hinting at conservation.

This discrepancy has led me to reconsider the philosophy of the merits of "priority"

and “conservation”. This matter is not of a trivial nature. It is a truism that the Rules, later Code, started when systematic description was far advanced. At first it seemed that priority would give the solution. But priority had, (i) by the acceptance of a starting date, a restricted validity banning all names before that date. Even by accepting that date botanists soon realized that a strict application of the principle of priority would lead to chaotic name changes in current literature.

The botanical world was naturally against name changes; it wanted stability, at least *as much stability of nomenclature as can be expected from and achieved by a growing, living branch of science*, both for themselves and for the use of all other people working with plants in order that they could make themselves understood.

This has led, inevitably, and for this purpose, in the course of time, to many further rigorous restrictions in the application of the principle of priority. For instance, (ii) in order to safeguard the genera and species described in *Species Plantarum*, the date 1754 of Linnaeus’s *Genera Plantarum* had to be neglected and is understood to be 1753. (iii) For reasons of advantage or usefulness, entailing stability of nomenclature, different later starting dates were accepted for a whole array of special groups. (iv) Already soon after the Rules were established it became evident that a number of generic names throughout the plant kingdom should be conserved, *nomina generica conservanda*; the present Code now contains c. 1000 conserved generic names. (v) According to Art. 72, note, we are under certain conditions free to use, that is conserve, a specific epithet from an illegitimate name. (vi) In recent years, we have even accepted conserved typification of taxa. (vii) And even of spellings. (viii) For the flowering plants we have accepted conserved names of families.

*Why these eight restrictions of the principle of priority?* Because in the early days priority was somewhat naively assumed to lead retroactively to order from chaos, but later proved to be an inadequate single means for this purpose, though still by its simplicity essential and useful as a guiding principle in a restricted sense. Because it was clear that nomenclature, to be useful, should be stable, and that we need conservation as an essential auxiliary in addition to priority and other principles.

*This leads to the conclusion that priority has no merit in itself, but serves only as a simple means to reach one accepted name, and that, if desirable, usefulness supersedes priority, as is the case in any legal code.*

For what purpose? *Clearly for stability of nomenclature.*

Priority is to be rejected if it defeats usefulness. In no way is sentiment incorporated in the Rules, nor has it ever been the intention that it should be, in spite of a not inconsiderable number of mostly non-qualified persons who tend to have an emotional feeling towards the opposite view.

Recently I read the following curious opinion: “*conservation is a procedure alien to the basic principles of the Code and is just a concession to the practical needs of stabilizing nomenclature.*” Is its author a botanist or a lawyer? Does he find, as a botanist, any scientific merit in the principle of priority itself? Has he not observed the essential role of conservation in the present Rules? Has he ever understood the reason why from the beginning conservation was incorporated into the Rules? Does it not occur to him that, in addition to reaching an internationally accepted procedure of nomenclature, the spirit of the Rules is to obtain the highest possible degree of stability and that the Rules, including both priority and conservation, are merely there to serve this purpose, to ensure that botanists can pursue their scientific work unhampered by nomenclatural misunderstanding?

It is curious that nowhere the principle of stabilizing nomenclature is implicitly stated in the Code, Art. 14 merely saying that conservation of generic names is *to avoid disadvantageous name changes*. It occurs to me that this is, even in the present Code, an absolute understatement. Conservation is necessarily aimed towards stability.

It occurs also to me that we have arrived at crossroads — at least I have so — and that the Edinburgh Congress should reach a decision about the essential interpretation of the Rules, the significance of conservation, and of stabilization of nomenclature in particular, in this way:

*Do we intend to have the Rules as a means to strive at the highest attainable stability of botanic nomenclature, or does this appear to us irrelevant and that the retention of a name used over a long period is more a sin than a virtue?*

This gains more and more importance as some taxonomists and bibliographers find great satisfaction in spending their time digging into literature for publication dates. Whatever their merits to World Science in finding out that some name was probably published two months or two weeks or two days earlier than another, they are becoming a menace to practising botanists. To all those familiar with bibliographic work it will be clear that these diggings are endless and will result in virtually endless name changes. My wife, in her census of publication dates additional to Pritzel, has expressed our considered view that we should have a rule prohibiting this digging by conserving dates of publication, at least leaving botanical nomenclature unaffected by whatever dates are produced by the diggers. What are they after? What is the use or their purpose? To honour names of a deceased colleague? Is there any scientific honour or merit in having a work validly published on Saturday or Monday? What about all botanists whose publications are retarded by a slow printer, a lazy binder, a fire, a sick postman, or by themselves in being meticulous and asking another proof for correcting two commas and a semicolon and through this virtue losing priority?

It is simply ridiculous, as Mr. Exell, monographer of combretaceous plants, said to me that almost everybody up till 1931 accepted *Calycopteris* Lamk as a correct name, which then was changed to *Getonia* Roxb., because of finding the publication date of Roxburgh's Coromandel plants, to change it again in 1954 to *Calycopteris* when another digger found a more precise publication of Lamarck's work. In a period of a few years time an old scrophulariaceous name *Centranthera* was changed into *Razumovia* and then again changed back into *Centranthera*. To insiders such cases appear a complete nuisance; to outsiders it makes our name-giving work ridiculous. Diggers should definitely be discouraged to continue their destructive hobby.

To summarize: My first proposal to the Congress is to furnish the following Guiding Principles, to the Committees for judging the merits of proposals for conservation of generic names:

- ( i ) That the spirit of the Code is to promote stability of nomenclature and that this supersedes the principle of priority, where possible, reasonable and desirable.
- ( ii ) That conservation of generic names is intended to stabilize nomenclature, irrespective of size or economic importance of taxa, whether herbs, trees or shrubs.
- ( iii ) That consequently those names must be conserved which are longest in general use, and that obsolete names, whatever the scientific merits of their authors, should not replace names which are in current usage.
- ( iv ) That the Committees for conservation be active in frustrating rash attempts of botanists to revive obsolete generic names and compose proposals themselves if stabilization of nomenclature is unnecessarily threatened.
- ( v ) That the Committees for conservation are empowered to emend inadequate proposals, in conjunction with the author, to make them fit for judgment by the Committee.

My second proposal, intimately connected with the first, is that the Rules should more implicitly state the importance of stability of nomenclature and its usefulness to botany.

This is nothing new, only acknowledging the existing situation, namely that the sole purpose of the eight restrictions on priority is directed to stability of nomenclature.

In the Preamble the statement, that the Code is to provide a stable method of naming taxonomic groups by means of the principle of priority, is immediately followed by the following sentence: "*Next in importance is the avoidance of the useless creation of names.*" In other words: stability of nomenclature and its usefulness.

The same sequence of thought is observed in Art. 14, priority followed by a restriction for usefulness.

My proposal is only to acknowledge this in the wording of the Code to read as follows:

- (i) Principle III. The nomenclature of a taxonomic group is based upon priority of publication *unless expressly limited for the purpose of nomenclatural stability.*

The addition is printed in italics. It is in accordance with the cited sentence of the Preamble and with Art. 14, even as it stands now. It also conforms to a similar restriction in Principle VI, whereby the Rules are declared retroactive "unless expressly limited", and in Principle IV which says that there is only one correct name for each taxon "except in specified cases".

- (ii) Art. 14. In order to avoid disadvantageous changes in the nomenclature of genera, families and intermediate taxa entailed by the strict application of the Rules, and especially of the principle of priority in starting from the dates given in Art. 13, this Code provides, in Appendices II and III, lists of names that are conserved (*nomina generica conservanda*) and must be retained as *useful* exceptions. *Conservation aims at retention of those generic names which best serve stability of nomenclature.*

The proposed changed wording is printed in italics. It gives clearer guidance to the subcommittees on conservation of generic names and removes ambiguity.

I may add that I have laid the text of this article before several experienced taxonomists and found them distinctly in favour. I am thankful to them for improvement of the wording. Some wanted to endorse the essence of the proposals in public, namely Dr. R. C. Bakhuizen van den Brink Jr., Dr. H. R. Fletcher, Dr. J. S. L. Gilmour, and Dr. H. W. Rickett.

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## NAMES OF TAXA ABOVE THE RANK OF ORDER

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The terms, denoting taxa below the rank of order are strictly regulated by the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature. They are formed by adding some suffix to the stem of the name of their type genus. They are always plural adjectives of the feminine gender agreeing grammatically with the substantive "plantae". So, for the names of families the suffix -ace with the ending -ae (-aceae), is used, for the names of subfamilies the suffix -e with the ending -ae (-eae) and so on.

The principles of naming taxonomic groups above the rank of order had not been worked out until recently. For instance, in Gobi's system of plants (Gobi, 1916) the same suffix is used for the designation of taxonomic groups of different ranks and, on the contrary, the names of taxonomic groups of the same rank are formed by adding different suffixes. So -ineae is used both for the terms denoting orders (Protascineae, Perisporineae etc.) and suborders (Pezizineae, Helwellineae etc.); in their turn, names of divisions are formed by adding now the stem -morpha (Protomorpha), now -phyta (Mycetophyta), or some others.