(96) Proposal to Spell out a New Principle in the Code: A Homage to Candolle
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(96) Proposal to spell out a new principle in the Code: a homage to Candolle

Werner Greuter

Candolle’s (1813) *Théorie élémentaire de la botanique* marks the birth date of biological nomenclature as we understand it. Its chapter on nomenclature, among other things, spells out for the first time the principle of priority for nomenclatural purposes (specified in the second edition of 1819 to mean priority of publication in print), and also the notion of maintenance of epithets on transfer except when this would lead to homonymy.

One has to await 1867 to find botanical nomenclature codified, thanks to the initiative of Augustin-Pyramus de Candolle’s son Alphonse. In drafting this first set of internationally recognised laws on plant names, Candolle was fully conscious of the importance of tradition, and was prepared to let it prevail over the letter of the law whenever this was expedient. The Candollean *Laws* of 1867 started with a chapter of “Guiding principles”, with seven articles that clearly spelled out this philosophy.

In our century the rules have been gradually tightened to make them more objective and more detailed. Historical faithfulness became the prevailing criterion, which often led to conflict with the desire to maintain past usage of names. Candolle’s message, to honour tradition in the first place, became largely forgotten. Only one of his fundamental tenets still survives among the principles of the botanical *Code* (Principle V, specifying that all scientific names are Latin or treated as such). One fell into disuse, one was simply abolished (it required that the terms and principles of botanical and zoological nomenclature should be kept as similar as possible). Much of the others, numbered 1-4, can still be found in the *Code* almost word for word, but relegated to the Preamble to form items 1 and 10.

Scientific plant names, being an internationally agreed and regulated set of standardised terms, have a number of essential functions to fulfil. First of all, they provide a common, generally understood thesaurus for all who refer to plant taxa in speech or writing. Secondly, they permit to record, store and access any kind of information linked to botanical taxa, both for the past and present. Thirdly, the special kind of scientific names that has now been in use for plants for well over two centuries is of a form that is easily memorised, having predictive and informational value.

It is most unlikely that the present system of plant nomenclature will ever be abandoned and replaced, as it provides the key to all published and stored plant knowledge of the past. The future of plant nomenclature is neither with a system based on Esperanto nor with one tailored to the classificatory needs of neo-Hennigian cladistics. Nevertheless plant nomenclature presently faces a structural crisis, since many feel that it does no longer meet the justified demands of the users of names. Proposals have been worked out which in my opinion could make nomenclature fit to face the challenges of the next century. These proposals, which sail under the flags of NCU and registration, are detailed elsewhere. They have given rise to considerable controversy among practising nomenclaturalists, and it is by no means certain that consensual agreement to adopt either or both of the new principles can be achieved in the near future.

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Even though the best way to go is still under discussion, the general goal, to turn the purists’ ivory tower that nomenclature used to be into a user-friendly service institution, is now I believe generally accepted. Would it not be a good idea to show this new, pragmatic attitude to the world at large, in principle at least if perhaps not yet in actual fact?

When drafting these lines I came across a brilliant and emphatic “Plea to let stability take precedence over priority ...” by Van Steenis (in Taxon 13: 154-157. 1964). His essay, which is still worth reading, included two unnumbered, belated proposals to the Edinburgh Congress. The first of them would have added a qualifying clause to the principle of priority: “unless expressly limited for the purpose of nomenclatural stability”. The record shows that at Edinburgh the proposal was referred to the Editorial Committee – which chose to take no action.

Today, when much of Van Steenis’s old wish de facto has been fulfilled, I would like to go a wee bit further. It seems to me a timely move to reintroduce the old Candollean spirit into the principles of our Code. While only a declaration of intent, and of no immediate practical consequence, such an addition would make it explicit that the nomenclatural community, whether or not it can reach consensus on practical measures such as NCU and registration at this point, is conscious of the expectations which it is facing and ready to meet them. The old Candollean legacy still in Preamble 1, while beautifully phrased, is too long to be turned directly into a principle. I distill its essence as the following proposal.

(96) Insert the following Principle ahead of the present Principle I:

“The aim of botanical nomenclature is to provide clear, efficient rules for the creation and maintenance of stable, unambiguous names for botanical taxa. All of the following principles are subordinate to this overriding goal.”