

Correspondence: What's in a Name?

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Under the title *A Rose by any other Name?* Hugh Wilson (2013a) muses on the penchant for changing the names of species. He notes that while some names have remained stable, an extraordinary sequence of changes has taken place in some instances. I write to support Hugh's plea for more stability.

The turmoil in nomenclature in recent years has been prompted by cladistic thinking and DNA-sequencing research. In this way, it is claimed that relationships between similar species can be sorted out. Recently, Heenen & Smissen (2013) have proposed that *Nothofagus* species should be confined to South American temperate trees, and the subgenera *Fuscopora* and *Lophozonia* be up-ranked to genus status to be used to describe the New Zealand species formerly in *Nothofagus*.

I suspect most of us recognize plants by simple, observable characteristics in the field. Thus names were often chosen to reflect a noticeable feature. At times, however, botanists have been imaginative. Wall & Allan (1950) note that *Alectryon* was chosen because the scarlet aril of the fruit resembled the colour of a cock's comb! But many names do have more obvious links. The genus *Campanula* does indeed have bellflowers. The sharp-leaved *Aciphylla* is perfectly well-named. The Eyebrights remind us of the folklore of their European cousins. For that reason, I was very happy with the name *Nothofagus* for the New Zealand Beeches. Their flowering and seed-masting behaviour, and indeed the very look of the beech forest, remind one of the European *Fagus* forest. Spurious beech (*Nothofagus*) was a good name. The new names *Fuscopora* and *Lophozonia* have more obscure allusions.

Now there are instances where name changes have some usefulness. Separating the woody New Zealand *Veronica* into the genus *Hebe* was a worthwhile tidiness, although there are proposals to claw back *Hebe* into *Veronica*! In terms of consolidation, putting several New Zealand peaflower trees into the one genus *Carmichaelia* was another tidiness.

What I am suggesting is that convenience of pigeon-holing, as Wilson puts it, should take precedence over presumed evolutionary descent. Doubtless more taxonomic knowledge will accumulate in the future, putting even more established names at risk of change. Will the process ever end? Numerous name changes render botanical books quickly outdated, hinder understanding of plants, and require authors to cite clumsy lists of synonyms, as Wilson (2013b) has done in his book.

I end on a personal note about names. My forename is Roger, which means noted for spear-throwing. I can't throw a cricket ball 5 m, so clearly that name is inappropriate. I ought to change it. In the middle of the nineteenth century

my forebears, after some iteration, changed their surname from Key to Keey. Clearly, I should revert to the original spelling of Key.

References

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