

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**TAXONOMIC PUBLISHING, VANDALISM AND BEST PRACTICE:  
AFRICAN JOURNAL OF HERPETOLOGY MAKES CHANGES  
THAT WILL SAFEGUARD AUTHORS**

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If you haven't heard about taxonomic vandalism yet, then you've either had your head in a python's hole or you're not in the taxonomic loop. Taxonomic vandals steal evidence for new species, genera or other taxonomic units from scientists before they are regarded as "published" by the ICZN. Recent articles (Borrell 2007; Kaiser et al. 2013; Wallach et al. 2009) have highlighted the huge headache of stolen taxonomy that puts a serious spanner in the works for taxonomists.

**Why are taxonomic vandals a problem?**

Describing a new family, genus or species requires a published description with a list of features that make it different from other species along with a new name. This puts taxonomy within the realms of anyone (scientist and amateur, alike), and deliberately so (see Borrell 2007). The principle of taxonomic priority (Article 23: ICZN 1999) allows the publication that names and describes a taxon first to be the original description.

New taxa which are poorly described create problems for anyone that works with them and sometimes for the taxa themselves. For example, poor descriptions lead to taxonomic confusion, and because taxonomy underpins conservation and legal procedure, poor taxonomic practice can threaten species by preventing their legal protection. Clearly, as a journal editor, it is my responsibility to ensure that best taxonomic practices are upheld in *African Journal of Herpetology*. Thus, all articles published in *African Journal of Herpetology* (taxonomic or otherwise) have already undergone rigorous peer review, which is regarded as best practice in taxonomy and science in general. Further, to deal with many examples of bad taxonomy that affect African taxa, *African Journal of Herpetology* will not use names listed in Kaiser et al. (2013) Table 1. For more information on how unscrupulous and hazardous taxonomic vandals can be, we refer you to Kaiser et al. (2013).

The problems associated with taxonomic priority are almost as old as taxonomy itself and apparently caused concern for Darwin amongst others (see Borrell 2007). At that time, publishing only consisted of printed hard copy (i.e. on paper). Today we have seen an explosion of electronic publications (epubs), many of which only exist in virtual electronic format. These epub's represent a potential loophole for the vandals to exploit as until 2012, no taxonomic works in epub's were officially recognised by the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (Dubois et al. in press). This would

have allowed taxonomic vandals, or anyone else, to claim priority by republishing any taxonomic descriptions on paper elsewhere. This loophole has now been closed with respect to epubs in an amendment of the Code (ICZN 2012).

### **An online database for taxonomy: ZooBank**

*African Journal of Herpetology* will now adopt ZooBank registration numbers for taxonomic works. ZooBank is a recently developed (since 2007) taxonomic registration database that provides numbers for unique taxonomic treatments (much in the same way that GenBank or EMBL provides unique numbers for genetic sequences). Authors will be required to register their work with ZooBank after a manuscript has been accepted and enter the registration number at the proof stage (just as they would enter GenBank accession numbers for genetic sequences). Epubs with ZooBank numbers constitute taxonomic priority, and thus prevent them from being susceptible to vandals.

This is good news for taxonomists because they can now publish in online journals and be assured that the new taxa are safeguarded. However, many journals, including the *African Journal of Herpetology*, currently have a three stage publishing process whereby articles that are accepted have their proofs corrected and then appear under a section called “online early” or “early view”. Once an issue is nearing completion, page numbers are given to articles that will appear in the issue and changes are made to these online articles accordingly. They then appear as electronic publications (epubs: exactly the same as the printed article, but electronic copies in pdf file format) at the same time as they are sent to the printers. These epubs then are the version protected by ZooBank registration numbers as they represent the final article. Unfortunately, this places the earlier versions of the article published online into a grey area – they are clearly almost identical to the epubs, but not considered officially published because of lacking finalised publication data (volume and page numbers).

To remove this potential hazard for taxonomic authors wanting to publish in *African Journal of Herpetology*, beginning January 2014 we are instigating new rules that will remove the need for online early articles. Instead of waiting for the editor to decide which articles belong in a given issue, each article will be issued page, issue, and volume numbers after proofs (a practice known in publishing as Build Issue Online). Each issue will then be sent to print once its page quota is filled. This new approach will also mean that authors in *African Journal of Herpetology* will not have to wait 6 months to receive the full citation of their publication because their epub will be available immediately. By removing the online early category, there will be no grey area that can be exploited by taxonomic vandals. For members and others who wish to read the contents of *African Journal of Herpetology*, there will be no change. Electronic versions of papers (epubs) will be available to HAA members free of charge online (at <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ther>), and the print copy will be sent by mail to members twice each year. The months of publication for hard copies will be moving to January and June (formerly they were published in April and October). Because page numbers will be issued in the order in which articles are copy-edited, articles will no longer be arranged into groupings as has been the tradition (i.e., original articles at the front followed by short communications). Consequently, we have decided to remove the short communication

category. The distinction between these two categories has become blurred over the years as original articles have become shorter and short communications longer. We will continue to consider review articles, but will remove the mini-review option.

*African Journal of Herpetology* should now prove a secure publication outlet for taxonomists, especially those who would like to share their results as soon as possible. While our actions detailed here may have come about as the result of reckless behaviour of a tiny minority, the consequence is an improved publishing service for members of the HAA, authors publishing in *African Journal of Herpetology*, and the ever-growing international readership of research on African herpetology. The increasing popularity of *African Journal of Herpetology* can be seen in our increasing Impact Factor (now at 0.81, and higher than most other herpetological specialty journals), and readership. We consider that the growing interest in the *African Journal of Herpetology* is in part due to the high quality of articles published there, and we assure readers that the changes discussed above will only serve to strengthen the quality of your journal.

### **In Summary**

1. *African Journal of Herpetology* will require that taxonomic papers are registered with ZooBank, with ZooBank numbers added at proof stage.
2. To combat taxonomic theft of online early articles, *African Journal of Herpetology* will issue volume, issue, and page numbers immediately following proof stage. This eliminates online early articles (iFirst) for *African Journal of Herpetology* because all epubs will represent the final electronic publications.
3. To alleviate the problem of mixing short contributions with original articles, *African Journal of Herpetology* will no longer have separate categories. All articles submitted will be treated as original articles. While review articles will still be considered, we will no longer have a separate “short communications” category.
4. These changes will be effective beginning issue 1, volume 62 (Jan 2014).

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