

# New Species Owe Names to Highest Bidder

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Next Thursday, Hugh Edmeades of Christie's auction house will bring down the gavel in Monaco's famed Oceanographic Museum and Aquarium. When he closes the bidding, a sinuous shark recently discovered thousands of miles away in Indonesian waters will have a new scientific name. And hundreds of thousands of dollars will be deposited in a bank, earmarked for programs to protect the shark's habitat.

The elegant, invitation-only "Blue Auction," hosted by the Monaco-Asia Society and Conservation International under the patronage of Monaco's Prince Albert II, is the boldest sign yet of a novel twist in the centuries-old system for naming new species.

Searching for new ways to raise money for environmental causes, scientists and conservationists are increasingly opting to sell naming rights to the highest bidder. But the trend — which is reshaping the way researchers name everything from monkeys to beetles — has sparked a fierce debate over the future of taxonomy, as well as conserva-

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See SPECIES, A8, Col. 1

# Conservation Groups Lure Donors With Rights to Name New Species

SPECIES, From A1

tion itself.

Ever since Swedish scientist Carl Linnaeus published "Species Plantarum" in 1753 and the 10th edition of "Systema Naturae" five years later, certain rules have governed how plants and animals get their official names. They are always in Latin and consist of two parts: The first specifies the genus; the second, the name of the particular species.

Traditionally, the person who first describes a newfound plant or animal in the academic literature got to name it. There are plenty of other rules in the hundreds of pages of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature, but those are the most important.

The rules say nothing about selling naming rights. So after Mark Erdmann, a senior adviser for Conservation International's Indonesia marine program, and consultant Gerald Allen discovered two new species of sharks last year, Erdmann thought, why not auction off the right to name the creatures they had found?

In the 18th and 19th centuries, explorers frequently named the flora and fauna they found after their financial backers. Erdmann reasoned he was simply updating the tradition by bestowing that honor on anyone willing to donate funds to help a species survive.

"Now you're going to name something after people who are paying after the fact, but they are paying for the conservation of those species," Erdmann said this summer as he surveyed the Bird's Head Seascape, the diverse ecosystem off the Papua province that is home to walking sharks and more than a thousand other species. "Same difference."

Erdmann, who will attend this week's auction to see who gets to name his sharks, is not the first to go this route. In late 2004, Wildlife Conservation Society scientist Robert Wallace discovered a foot-tall, brown-and-orange monkey weighing about two pounds in Bolivia's Madidi National Park. Locals had known about the monkey for years, but it had never been formally described. Wallace wanted the park, which is roughly the size of New Jersey, to benefit, so he and his colleagues gave the naming rights to a governmental agency and a conservation organization in Bolivia and organized a one-week

## Call It What You Will

A German nonprofit called Biopat maintains a database of species that people can name for a price. Three examples:



**Name:** *Scelochilus newyorkianus*  
**Description:** Twin Bolivian orchids  
**Patron:** Anonymous  
**Story:** Named in honor of those who died in the twin towers, by an American businessman who lost friends in the 2001 terrorist attack on New York City.

SOURCE: Biopat



**Name:** *Hyla joannae*  
**Description:** A Peruvian frog  
**Patron:** Fiction writer Alan Dean Foster

**Story:** Named in honor of his wife, Jo Ann, in commemoration of their 25th wedding anniversary.



**Name:** *Maxillaria gorbatschowii*  
**Description:** A Bolivian orchid  
**Patron:** Family friend of Mikhail Gorbachev

**Story:** Named in honor of former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev for his 70th birthday and for his environmental work through the Green Cross foundation.

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online auction.

In March 2005, the Golden Palace Casino — an online gambling operation — paid \$650,000 for the rights and named the primate *Callicebus aureipalatii*. (Aureipalatii means "golden palace" in Latin; the casino was not allowed to add ".com" because that could not be Latinized.) Today, the casino has a Web site dedicated to its official mascot, where customers can not only listen to the primate's cry but also purchase GoldenPalaceMonkey.com T-shirts, tracksuits and even thongs.

A German nonprofit called Biopat has tried a more systematic approach. For the past eight years, Biopat has maintained a database of plants and animals that individuals can name for a price that depends on the species. The group divides the proceeds between the institution of the scientist who found it and support for field projects in the area where it resides. It has raised nearly \$514,000 so far for naming rights to about 120 species.

"This is a new instrument for funding taxonomy," said Biopat Chairman Claus Batke, who added that his group just bought a microscope for Peruvian researchers.



BY JESSE TILPNER — THE WASHINGTON POST

Mark Erdmann, a Conservation International scientist, helped discover two species of sharks in Indonesia. The right to name them is up for auction.

Occasionally these naming fundraisers flop. In 1999 a Texas bird-watcher, unaffiliated with Biopat, tried to auction off the name of an antshrike he spotted in Brazil for \$200,000 to benefit his state's Audubon Society chapter. No one met his price.

Despite their worthy goals, these efforts have begun to worry

officials at the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN), the 112-year old body that has the final word on scientific names for plants and animals. ICZN officials publicly questioned Biopat's practices in a February 2000 letter to the journal Science.

"If new species start to acquire a commercial value that's pretty

hefty, then there's suddenly an incentive for people to 'discover,' and I use that word in quotes, new species," said Andrew Polaszek, the commission's executive secretary, in an interview. "And the ramifications of that are enormous."

Polaszek has been conducting an online survey of the commission's 27 members, who are scattered across the globe, to determine whether the ICZN should issue a formal policy. One option, he said, would be for the commission itself to oversee the auctions. "Whether we like it or not, it's already happening," he said.

Even some scientists who back the idea of auctioning scientific names for a good cause said they wish conservation groups were not forced to take such steps.

"Theoretically, I don't like it, as I believe Latin names are best if they represent some important and easy to remember aspect of the species, particularly since these names should persist into the foreseeable future," Tim McClanahan, a senior conservation zoologist at the Wildlife Conservation Society, wrote in an e-mail. "A white crane should have a name like *Ibis alba*, not *Ibis schwartznegeri*. Practically, how-

ever, I commiserate with the need to raise money for these often rare species and know that we have to use all types of tricks to raise money for things, where tricks should not be, but are required."

Plus, many scientists point out, plenty of species already have bizarre or honorific names. *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, a squid relative, is stuck with a moniker meaning "vampire squid from hell." And in 2005, entomologists Quentin Wheeler and Kelly B. Miller named three slime-mold beetles *Agathidium blushi*, *Agathidium cheneyi* and *Agathidium rumsfeldi*, after President Bush, Vice President Cheney and then-Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld. (Wheeler and Miller meant the names, which were accepted by the commission, as honorifics, and Bush himself called Wheeler to thank him for the tribute.) Unlike naming decisions made by scientists toiling in their labs, Thursday's auction in Monaco will boast plenty of glamour. Prince Albert will welcome the guests, who are invited to "Leave Your Mark on Our Blue Planet," for pre-dinner cocktails in the museum's famed aquarium. The suggested opening bid for the *Hemiscyllium* walking shark, which Erdmann and Allen found in Indonesia's Cendrawasih Bay, is set at \$500,000. The bidding for an attractive, spiky *Pterois* lionfish starts at \$250,000.

Conservation International President Peter A. Seligmann said in an interview that all the money raised in the auction — which has the Indonesian government's backing — will go to preserve the Bird's Head Seascape and to train Indonesian marine scientists.

"Historically, many scientists have rewarded benefactors who have supported their work," Seligmann said. "In a way, this is a way to create more benefactors for the protection of nature and science."

Staff researchers Madonna Lebling and Magda Jean-Louis contributed to this report.

### MORE PHOTOS

To see photos of the auction lots and views from Bird's Head Seascape in Indonesia, go to [www.washingtonpost.com/science](http://www.washingtonpost.com/science).