

# Rescue plan needed for taxonomy

Sir — Following the House of Lords select committee report on systematic biology research<sup>1</sup>, an important report on taxonomy was published by the UK Natural Environment Research Council (NERC)<sup>2</sup>. This coincided with an article in *Nature* on the relentless decline in the number of posts in taxonomy in Britain<sup>3</sup>. This decline continues and applies to most of Europe and beyond<sup>4,5</sup>. [As discussed elsewhere in this issue, see Briefing, pages 115–119.]

The NERC report identified the largest problem to be alpha (inventory) taxonomy (concerned with the recognition and description of species), as it estimated that only about 10 per cent of the species on Earth are known to science. The only parts of alpha taxonomy that have significantly benefited from the British government's most welcome Darwin Initiative are those programmes encouraging the production of user-friendly identification keys. Under the Darwin Initiative a British entomologist may be funded to visit an overseas country for an advisory or training mission or an overseas person may be funded to visit Britain for training<sup>6</sup>. However, a British entomologist will not be funded to carry out alpha taxonomy research on exotic species.

The British government's funding of the

UK Systematics Forum has done much to publicize the plight of taxonomy. So far not a single new post in alpha taxonomy has resulted from the forum's otherwise admirable efforts. Indeed it is now clear that alpha taxonomy will only return to UK institutions of higher education if ring-fenced money is allocated for the purpose<sup>7</sup>. The only practical suggestion that has so far been proposed to achieve this is the establishment of an Endowment Fund for Alpha Taxonomy<sup>1</sup>. This suggestion was followed by the proposal that National Lottery money be used for the purpose. This proposal was evaded by the last government<sup>8</sup> and the present government only responded when its failure to reply was publicized<sup>8,9</sup>.

This publicity has now prompted a letter from Whitehall saying that the government is considering a National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA), funded from the lottery. This could provide a source of funds for the proposed endowment fund for taxonomy. Whether NESTA will rise to the challenge will partly depend on the scientific community being able to persuade it of the urgent necessity to revive alpha taxonomy. Up to now the scientific community has tended to eclipse its appeal for more funding for taxonomy by

asking for increased funding for more glamorous fields of science.

It remains to be seen whether the present government, like the last, is unconcerned at the continuing decline of alpha taxonomy, despite political rhetoric in support of the need for biodiversity research. The fact that such research is inescapably grounded in alpha taxonomy eludes many politicians.

Will Britain's scientific community care if alpha taxonomy continues to become primarily the preserve of enthusiastic amateurs, most of whom are only interested in the species of their own country? The taxa currently requiring the greatest amount of research are precisely those for which a global perspective is essential.

**Henry Disney**

*University Museum of Zoology,  
Downing Street, Cambridge CB2 3EJ, UK*

1. House of Lords Paper 22-II, 305 (London, 1991).
2. *Evolution and Biodiversity: The New Taxonomy* (NERC, Swindon, 1992).
3. Gaston, K. J. & May, R. M. *Nature* **356**, 281–282 (1992).
4. Blackmore, S. & Cutler, D. (eds) *Systematics Agenda 2000: The Challenge for Europe* (Linnean Society, London, 1996).
5. Black, C. C. (ed.) *Loss of Biological Diversity: A Global Crisis* (National Science Board, Washington, 1989).
6. Disney, R. H. L. *Sci. & Publ. Affairs* Autumn, 4–5 (1996).
7. Joysey, K. A. *FSC Mag.* **10**, 2 (1995).
8. Disney, R. H. L. *Biologist* **45**, 6 (1998).
9. Moore, P. G. *Biologist* **44**, 480 (1997).

## Untenured in Toronto

Sir — I would like to respond to your News article "Fight heats up over Toronto racial discrimination claim", which gives an incomplete account of the facts of the case and misrepresents some of the issues in this dispute (*Nature* **392**, 638; 1998).

Kin-Yip Chun was one of many unsuccessful applicants for the two tenure-track positions filled in geophysics over the past decade by the Department of Physics at the University of Toronto. Your report gives credence to a claim that the two candidates actually hired "were less qualified than he was", a statement that would, among others, surprise the British university that had previously placed our first appointee as chair of its geophysics department.

Chun was hired by the Department of Physics in 1985 as a grant-funded research associate for a limited term of two years. Your statement that Chun "was told there were no funds to pay him" is untrue; this research associateship was fully funded.

Chun was employed as a research associate for his nine years with the university. In 1989, he was awarded a status-only appointment as an assistant professor so he could act as a principal investigator and a supervisor for graduate students. Although

he claims that "he was obliged to work as a professor", his academic duties were modest.

In December 1992, Chun insisted on continuing his research, but refused to sign a renewal of his contract. In November 1994, the university was forced to seek a campus police escort for Chun after he refused to consider all employment options offered to him and refused to vacate his office. Your article states that "no reason was given at the time". This is again false.

During his period as a research associate, Chun competed in 1987 and 1992 for two tenure-stream positions in the Department of Physics. Although you quote his claim that he "had been passed over for tenure", in fact he never held a position eligible for tenure. After the 1992 competition, Chun alleged that racial bias was a factor in his not being offered a tenure-stream position. To respond to these allegations, the university conducted several investigations. None of these, including one performed by vice-dean Cecil Yip, found any evidence to substantiate racial bias.

Finally, although you note the statement in Yip's report that the 1987 appointment could hypothetically have been made to "keep Chun out of the job", you omit to add that Yip found no evidence to support this.

The accusation of exploitation develops

from the blurring of roles that Chun faced once he was given the opportunity to be a principal investigator in seismological research in 1989. Yip's finding that Chun was placed in an exploitative situation has been accepted by the university. Consequently, the university has made a series of offers to Chun intended to remedy any harm that its actions may have had on his research and career.

Chun so far has rejected all these offers and insists that the only remedy is an academic appointment for a period of time equivalent to a *de facto* tenure-stream position. His demand contravenes the university's regulations on tenure, as well as the Canadian Association of University Teachers and the university faculty association's strongly held views.

Chun has more recently relaxed this demand, but other issues still remain unresolved. The University of Toronto continues to seek a negotiated settlement.

**Pekka K. Sinervo** (Chair)

*Department of Physics, University of Toronto,  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1A7*

**We accept the specific corrections of statements made by *Nature* in the article, and apologize for any misleading impression that those errors may have caused. — Editor, *Nature***