



SATURDAY, MAY 17, 1930.

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
The Rules of Zoological Nomenclature . . . . .	733
International Trade. By W. G. Linn Cass . . . . .	735
Preservation of Scenery in the Thames Valley. By Dr. Vaughan Cornish . . . . .	737
Fossil Brains. By P. J. van der Feen, Jr. . . . .	738
Our Bookshelf . . . . .	739
Letters to the Editor:	
Reflection of Positive Ions by Crystals.—Prof. A. J. Dempster . . . . .	741
A Point in the Theory of 'Critical Illumination' in the Microscope. Dr. L. C. Martin . . . . .	741
Atmospheric Light Columns from Artificial Lights.—A. H. R. Goldie; Dr. F. J. W. Whipple . . . . .	743
Telosynapsis or Structural Hybridity in <i>Cenothera</i> ? C. D. Darlington . . . . .	743
The Integuments of Whales.—Robert W. Gray . . . . .	744
Search for an Inactive Isotope of the Element 84 (Polonium).—Prof. G. Hevesy and A. Guenther . . . . .	744
The Oldest Record of a Slug.—Prof. T. D. A. Cockerell . . . . .	745
Polarisierte und gerichtete Röntgenstrahlung aus einem Kristall.—Prof. J. Stark . . . . .	745
The Ancestry of Man.—Prof. Henry Fairfield Osborn, For. Mem., R.S. . . . .	745
Scattering of X-rays by bound Electrons.—Prof. B. B. Ray . . . . .	746
The Identity of Colloidal Particles in Soap Sols and Gels.—Dr. K. Krishnamurti . . . . .	746
Intensities in Band Spectra.—Elmer Hutchisson . . . . .	746
The New Planet.—G. F. Daniell . . . . .	747
Angler-Fishes. By Dr. C. Tate Regan, F.R.S. . . . .	747
The Geological History of the Pacific Ocean. By Prof. J. W. Gregory, F.R.S. . . . .	750
News and Views . . . . .	752
Our Astronomical Column . . . . .	757
Research Items . . . . .	758
The <i>Snellius</i> Expedition. By Commander P. M. Van Riel . . . . .	761
Optical Rotatory Power. By Prof. T. M. Lowry, F.R.S. . . . .	762
Archæology and Bible History . . . . .	764
University and Educational Intelligence . . . . .	764
Historic Natural Events . . . . .	765
Societies and Academies . . . . .	765
Official Publications Received . . . . .	767
Diary of Societies . . . . .	768

The Rules of Zoological Nomenclature.

AS already announced in NATURE, the International Zoological Congress will meet at Padua next September. A week before the Congress opens, the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature will resume its sittings so as to report to the Congress on numerous cases that have been submitted for its opinion and on certain important proposals that have been under consideration since the last Congress. It is useful to remember that this Commission has carried on its work continuously since its appointment in 1895. Even during the War its members were in correspondence, and, though a longer interval than usual elapsed between the Congresses, there was no break of any kind. The composition of the Commission of eighteen members has continued subject to the bye-laws, according to which members are elected for a term of nine years and one-third retire triennially. Thus the wisdom of experience is seasoned with new ideas. Criticism has been levelled at the constitution of the Commission, but it is difficult to devise any better method. Great care is taken that the various branches of systematic zoology and the different parts of the world should be represented. A commissioner must be interested in the subject and must have access to a good library, but no attempt is made to seek out the holders of particular opinions.

However such an international body be appointed, and with whatever care it weighs the arguments, its decisions cannot please everybody. It would be absurd to suppose that all zoologists could agree on these disputed questions. Inevitably also there is perennial conflict between the general zoologist and the specialist, between the morphologist and the systematist. It seems obvious that the decision must rest with those who are constantly dealing with names and have studied the principles of nomenclature; but since the Congress at Monaco the Commission has accepted fairly the compromise there agreed upon, by which the rules may be suspended when their rigid application would lead to worse confusion.

At Budapest, in 1927, the Commission spent several days in attempting to meet the views of many critics. No final decision was reached, but certain amendments were suggested in the Commission by way of compromise, and they have to be finally voted on at Padua. An account of these and other proposals of later date was recently given by the Secretary of the Commission, Prof. C. W. Stiles, to the International Congress of

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Entomology, and is published in its *Transactions* (4, pp. 622-645). Some of them may be mentioned here.

At an early date the Congress refused to receive from the Commission any amendments to the rules that had not received a unanimous vote in Commission. Of recent years the view has gained ground, particularly in Europe, that this permitted an obstinate minority (possibly of one) to bar generally desired reforms, and it has been proposed that any amendments which obtain a majority vote in Commission should be reported to the Congress and decided by it in open meeting. This plainly goes too far in the other direction and it is not surprising that the Commission has rejected it twice. It is, however, to come up again, and a compromise has been proposed, as follows :

“ At least all those proposals for amendments to or additions to the International Rules of Zoological Nomenclature which have obtained—*first*, a majority of five-sixths of the total membership of the Commission of Nomenclature for the time being, and *subsequently*, five-sixths of the votes of those present at the meeting of the Commission, shall be the recommendations of the Commission to the Congress.”

This has been countered by a proposition that “ The stability of the rules is a prime and fundamental principle ”. Theoretically, most workers will accept this, for constant revision of the rules would be disastrous. It is further argued that rules based on a unanimous vote should not be altered except by unanimous vote. The practical question seems to be whether a rule which experience has shown to be objectionable should be modified soon or at a later date. No doubt impracticable or unwise proposals will be made from time to time, but it is highly improbable that they would ever gain the votes of five-sixths of the Commission. On the other hand, it does seem probable that any proposal supported outside the Commission by a large body of working zoologists and inside it by fifteen of its eighteen members would some day gain the suffrages of all the Commissioners. Is anything gained by postponing that day ?

Other proposals that fall to be discussed this year concern type-designation by elimination, the acceptance of generic names used by non-binominal authors, and the change of starting-point from Linnæus' “ *Systema Naturae* ”, Ed. X. to Ed. XII. This last would, if accepted, throw an enormous amount of work accomplished during the past thirty years on to the scrap-heap ; but its acceptance is in the highest degree unlikely.

It is a somewhat curious fact that on all these questions except the last there is an apparent cleavage of opinion between American and European zoologists. If one could discover the true reasons for this divergence, one would probably arrive at the best solution of the matters in dispute. Some will tell us that the American pack merely comes to heel at the call of Prof. Stiles, an absurdity that carries its own refutation to anyone acquainted with American conditions. Perhaps one reason is to be found in the mentality that leads citizens of the United States to organise their activities, whether of business or sport, on lines of mechanical thoroughness manifest in such apparatus as rationalisation, classifications, card-indexes, and rules. The Englishman, if not the European at large, prefers freedom to over-much legislation. He is quite as law-abiding as any American, and has indeed so high a respect for the law that he will not pass laws unlikely to be obeyed and is ready to reform those that prove harmful.

Prof. Stiles maintains that, because eighteen (or fewer) people have once unanimously agreed on a rule, that rule should never be altered except by unanimous vote. At the outset unanimity was forced on the Commission by the Congress, and it looks as though the Commissioners were consequently more unanimous in their votes than they were in their opinions, for the sake of getting something done. Anyone with experience of committees knows how often practical considerations lead him to vote for a proposition with which he does not fully agree. If now there is a real demand by zoologists that the power of veto resident in any single commissioner should be taken away, and a five-sixths effective majority substituted, is there any good reason why the Commission should not accept this and thus conciliate the opposition ? The further reason given by Prof. Stiles is that the rules should be stable in principle and that any reversal would be disastrous. With this thesis most zoologists will doubtless agree, though there might not be such general agreement on what is a principle and what is not, and some might claim that a non-retroactive change is not a reversal. However that may be, it appears highly improbable that when rules have been maintained for thirty years on a unanimous basis, any serious alterations will win the votes of five-sixths of the Commission. Important as the stability of the rules doubtless is, it is no less important that they should be generally accepted and applied. The Commissioners may be so immovable that the flood of zoologists will pass them by.