

Taxonomy symposium honours leading scientist

Some of New Zealand's top taxonomists met in Wellington in April for a symposium to highlight their work and discuss, among other topics, how it affects New Zealand's economy.

Taxonomy is one of New Zealand's most important sciences, but its impact is often not widely known nor understood. It is especially important for identifying organisms that may threaten New Zealand's biosecurity and for monitoring changes in biodiversity and the environment. The quality of New Zealand environmental research relies on the ability to accurately identify organisms being studied.

Taxonomists classify organisms according to their similarities, classifying them into species, genera and families. New Zealand has about 30 taxonomic collections, including the National Invertebrate Collection, housed at the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research (NIWA) in Wellington.

The symposium also honoured the contributions made by leading biodiversity scientist Dr Dennis Gordon, emeritus researcher at NIWA.

Dr Gordon, who retired recently, has made significant contributions to the understanding of biodiversity in New Zealand and around the world. He led a project in which local and international scientists collaborated to produce the ambitious three-volume New Zealand Inventory of Biodiversity, published in 2009–2012, that included more than 56,200 living species and 14,700 fossil species.

The symposium brought together scientists from government departments, Crown research institutes, museums, and universities to discuss the role that taxonomy plays in biological science.

It followed a report released by the Royal Society of New Zealand late last year on the state of taxonomy in New Zealand. This report was the work of an expert panel on National Taxonomic Collections chaired by NIWA principal scientist, Wendy Nelson. It expressed serious concern for the future of the science as a result of declining support for nationally important collections at a time when demand for their services was increasing within New Zealand and overseas, particularly as growing international trade increased biosecurity risks.

The panel recommended collections be recognised as national heritage assets and essential components of the New Zealand science system. It also recommended the Government urgently address the immediate investment needs of national taxonomic collections and research staff so that critical expertise was restored and services and quality not put at further risk. New investment was also needed, the report said, to support training and to ensure New Zealand has a strong and expert taxonomic workforce.

Symposium co-organiser and NIWA taxonomist Dr Daniel Leduc said it was hoped that the symposium would shine a spotlight on the important work being carried out for the benefit of New Zealand in managing its natural heritage.

'We also wanted to celebrate the work of Dr Dennis Gordon, who has championed the cause of taxonomy and systematics in New Zealand during his long and productive career. Thanks to his leadership and broad knowledge across a wide variety of groups, New Zealand became the first country to catalogue its entire living and fossil biodiversity following the publication of the third and final volume of the New Zealand Inventory of Biodiversity in 2012. Dennis has the rare ability to rally experts from a wide range of fields, and this is apparent in the broad spectrum of speakers at this symposium. Fortunately for us, Dennis is staying on as emeritus scientist at NIWA and continues to conduct much-needed taxonomic research.'