

# Counting All Species

In reference to the proposal by the all Species Foundation for a complete catalog of life on Earth, which is described in the News Focus article "Up for the count?" by A. Lawler (26 Oct., p. [769](#)), I was quoted as saying, "This is well intentioned but incredibly naïve." The statement, out of context, could be misleading, so I would like to clarify my meaning.

The idea of a complete catalog of species is not new, and efforts related to specific taxa have been under way for some years.

What is interesting about the new proposal is that it would include all taxa and take advantage of recent technological developments that could provide a quantitative leap in the area of systematics.

Therefore, what I view as naïve is not the all-species count itself, but attempting to accomplish it without taking into account the present political setting. The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, signed in 1992 and ratified by 181 countries to date, established national sovereignty over biodiversity, which in effect restricts the free flow of biological specimens around the globe. The Convention also adopted the Global Taxonomy Initiative (GTI), and thus any proposal for a complete catalog of life on Earth must work within this framework.

For the new proposal to succeed given such parameters, two criteria are essential. First, those developing countries where much of the biodiversity is found must have help in building up their taxonomic research capacity both technologically and academically. There are good examples where this is working, including InBio in Costa Rica, CONABIO in Mexico, and the Alexander von Humboldt Institute in Colombia. And second, this endeavor needs to be a truly global partnership, bringing together the systematists and institutions from around the world and giving them the tools and resources they need to work within this new global context.

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Andrew Lawler

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