Comments on the stability of fish family names
(See BZN 47: 97–100, 138)

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In attempting to counter arguments (Steyskal, 1980) for using family-group names that are grammatically correct, Wheeler joins the ranks of those who perceive the threat of 'confusion' lurking behind every letter in a scientific name. Wheeler also maintains that the changes Steyskal proposed will render many names 'almost unpronouncable'. Yet most of the cases he discusses involve no more than the insertion of the syllable 'id', so that the resulting name would still be easily recognized by any intelligent person familiar with the previous spelling in the first place. Perhaps the 'fishery workers, environmental archaeologists, and ecologists', whose interests Wheeler seeks to protect, should be concerned by his implied condescension that even those of their number perceptive enough to notice such minor changes would not have the mental capability to avoid being confused by them. As far as pronunciation is concerned, although it can be argued that 'idid' is exactly twice as difficult to pronounce as 'id', such iteration should not present an insurmountable obstacle to anyone not already in need of a speech therapist.

Those who create nomenclature and are responsible for its proper use ought to have some knowledge of the basic Latin and Greek roots of scientific words and care about their preservation. With such knowledge one understands that grammatical precision actually prevents confusion, whereas grammatical lapses may create it. An excellent case in point is one of the instances mentioned by Wheeler, the incorrect name 'CERATODIDAE' versus the correct CERATODONTIDAE. The grammatically correct form is immediately recognizable as being derived from the Greek roots *cerato-* (horn) and *-odous* (tooth) whereas the incorrect form might be taken to be derived from the Latin *cera* (wax) and *todus* (a small bird). Distinguishing between these two possible etymologies, one of which is completely nonsensical, is not, in my opinion, a matter of 'grammatical nicety'.

Furthermore, there are among fishes, especially fossils, a host of genera ending in *-odus* that are the basis of family-group names that have been correctly formed with the ending -ODONTIDAE, e.g. *Synodus*, *Pimelodus*, *Hemiodus*, *Helodus*, *Pristodus*, *Copodus*, *Cochliodus*, *Ptychodus*, *Onychodus*, *Psammodus*, *Chirodus*, *Pycnodus*, etc. If Wheeler were heeded there would then be two sets of names based on the same root, one that is correctly formed and another (e.g. 'CERATODIDAE') that is not. The god Stability is unlikely to find a reliable servant in the demon Inconsistency. The advantages of clarity of meaning and consistency of usage that are conferred by precise grammar far outweigh the unsubstantiated fear that legions of fisheries biologists will be overcome by confusion as a result of adherence to grammatical standards.