

A Capital case for common names “of species of **fishes**— a white crappie or a White Crappie

Common names of fishes are an important and often primary means of fish biologists communicating with each other and with the public. Although common names will never replace scientific names, they are indispensable in many areas such as fisheries science, management, administration, and education. In recognition of the important role common names play in communicating information about fishes, the American Fisheries Society (AFS) and the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists (ASIH) have a long-standing cooperative effort to promote the use of standard common names for species of fishes through the joint Committee on Names of Fishes. The first list of fish names, although not covering all species then known in the United States and Canada, was published in 1948 (Chute et al. 1948). This was expanded in 1960 to include all known species in these two countries (Bailey et al. 1960). The list was revised approximately every 10 years with the last edition being Robins et al. (1991). The next list and the sixth edition is expected to be completed this year and will include the ichthyofauna of Mexico, thus giving a complete list of fishes for all North America. The effort's success is evidenced by use of standard common names in fish journals and by the adoption and routine use of the common names list by many agencies, institutions, and natural resource educators. For example, many publications on fishes only require the use of the scientific name with the standard common name once, and thereafter, the common name may be used.

The joint societal effort also resulted in a set of principles guiding the selection of common names. These guidelines include a decision, with which we disagree and which is the subject of this editorial, on capitalization of common names. We strongly support the development and continued updating of standard common names and recognize the importance of the guidelines developed for their use, but believe there are reasons to change the policy on capitalization of common names in English. The common names of fishes by convention have been treated as common nouns, not proper nouns, and accordingly spelled in lower case, e.g., rainbow trout, not Rainbow Trout, and white crappie, not White Crappie. In North American publications, at least, this editorial policy stems from Principle 5 of Bailey et al. (1960), which states, “Common names shall not be capitalized in text use except for those elements that are proper names. (e.g., rainbow trout, but Sacramento perch).” The principle, reflecting the practice in many journals, was based on an interpretation of the rules of English grammar, and as such, is primarily a matter of convention.

We feel the importance of common names, as a primary currency of communication about fishes, dictates that the AFS and ASIH (publishers of the journal *Copeia*) change the convention that now treats common names as common nouns. Specifically, we recommend that the editorial boards of both societies endorse and accept capitalization of common names and that this also be accepted by the joint Committee on Names of Fishes. We present in this editorial arguments for both societies to consider on the merits of capitalization of common names of fishes.

We are aware of the polemics (and attendant emotion) that capitalization of common names invokes among some of the academic community but choose to focus on how users of fish common names might be best served. Whether common names of fishes are technically proper nouns (denoting a particular or unique individual, place, or thing, i.e., the species as an individual, Wiley 1981; Coleman and Wiley 2001) or common nouns (naming things of a group, i.e., individual fish belonging to a species), is to us all a matter of convention. People will either accept the advantages of capitalization and see no conflict with conventions of English grammar or will reject the idea citing conventions of grammar as justification.

We anticipate three interrelated arguments against capitalization, all of which are premised on convention or perceived loss of credibility stemming from change. First, there is the “preponderant usage” argument that stems from dictionaries and style manuals advocating lower case for common names. We respond that this is merely acknowledgment of past practice and not an argument against change. If the national and international community of fish biologists (e.g., AFS and ASIH) agrees to change, then dictionaries and style manuals will ultimately reflect practice. Second, as noted earlier, we anticipate the “formal grammar” argument that common names are common nouns, not proper nouns. Although dictionaries treat common names

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many journals, is a logical addition to assist readers in locating information in text. Further, the use of capitalized common names gives greater recognition (if not actual respect) for fishes from sport and commercial fishers, lawmakers, policy makers, resource managers, and the general public.

Our recommendation of capitalization would apply to all components of a common name of a species, hence, Bluebarred Pygmy Sunfish, but when two or more species are referred to we suggest the form Green and Spotted sunfishes. We suggest that all common names representing taxa or non-taxa above the species level be in lower case and in the plural form, e.g., pygmy sunfishes, sunfishes, bony fishes, and fishes. The conventions on when to capitalize and pluralize would also help remove ambiguity in those cases where, as in Robins et al. (1991), there is a species bearing the same name as the family name, e.g., Squirrelfish (*Holocentrus adscensionis*) and squirrelfishes (Holocentridae).

We have benefited by comments from many individuals over several years in discussing the issue that the common name of species in English be treated as proper nouns. 

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INVITED RESPONSE

Capital Punishment

The proposal by Nelson et al. (2002, this issue) to capitalize the common names of fish species seems to me to reflect some underlying but still poorly formulated veneration of biological species. I oppose the proposal, but I am unwilling to enter an unrewarding debate over veiled value systems. I do think the arguments advanced in support of the proposal are far from compelling, and I will address these.

The brief history of the Names of Fishes Committee (currently chaired by Joe Nelson) with which Nelson et al. begin their proposal is accurate but incomplete. The committee adopted its guiding principles for the second edition (1960) of its list. Principle 5 ("Common names shall not be capitalized in text use except for those elements that are proper names") was not chosen arbitrarily; the committee polled many ichthyologists and fishery workers who overwhelmingly favored using lower case (R. M. Bailey, letter to AFS President Moffitt, 2 June 2000). Consistent application of the principles, as a package, over the ensuing has been a key factor in the widespread acceptance of the committee's recommended names. The committee's list has not been static, however. Although few existing names change from one edition of the list to the next, new species are constantly added-160 to the fifth edition and many more to the upcoming sixth edition-and common names for many of these are committee inventions whose stabilities have to be proven. The committee's effort of a decade ago to standardize the common names of non-North American fishes (Robins et al. 1991) has met considerable resistance from ichthyologists and fishery scientists, which should warn us against declaring these names to be "proper." Changing the rules in midstream, especially if done to promote an agenda external to the committee's charge, will not make the goal of name stability easier to accomplish. The implications of such change extend beyond fish and fisheries. The fish name's committee's principles have been adopted almost verbatim by several scientific societies that are working with AFS to standardize the common names of North American aquatic invertebrates (e.g., Turgeon et al. 1998).

Nelson et al. anticipate objections to their proposal from defenders of conventional grammar. I decline to argue whether past practices should permit or deter change, but I draw attention to a larger dynamic. Use of capitalization has been declining in the English language for a long time (longer in the United States than in Canada), as

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