

What's in a Species' Name? More Than \$450,000

The German group BIOPAT has successfully raised funds for taxonomy and conservation science by selling the rights to name species

Everyone in Stan Vlasimsky's family has an alter ego in the animal kingdom. A dainty Bolivian orchid, *Epidendrum lezlieae*, is named for his wife Lezlie. For daughter Claudia and son Liam, there are frogs in Panama and Madagascar, respectively. Daughter Magdeline has a Filipino butterfly carrying her name. And for the newest addition, toddler Caiden, there is a Peruvian lizard, *Euspondylus caidenii*.

Vlasimsky is not a rugged biologist trudging through remote forests or swamps and naming newly discovered species. The business consultant was on a flight 5 years ago when he read about BIOPAT (Patrons for Biodiversity), a German nonprofit group offering naming rights to new species in exchange for donations to conservation science (*Science*, 21 January 2000, p. 421). "What a novel idea," says Vlasimsky, whose namesake, *Eupholus vlasimskyi*, is a belligerent-looking black beetle. "It was a great way to support not just the scientist's research but also the species. And at the end of the day, it was a lasting gift."

BIOPAT isn't the only game in town. This week the New York City-based Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) held an online auction for the right to name a new species of titi monkey—a rare find from the jungles of Bolivia's Madidi National Park. "Bolivia is one of the poorest countries in South America, and it's hard to raise money to protect these places," says WCS primatologist Robert Wallace, the monkey's co-discoverer.

The WCS auction was, in part, inspired by BIOPAT's success. Born to some controversy in December 1999—critics called for the group to abandon its plan—BIOPAT has so far facilitated more than 100 species sponsorships and raised more than \$450,000 for research and conservation. The cost of naming a species ranges from \$3,500 for various insects to \$13,000 for a hummingbird; the more attractive or rare the species, the higher the price. The proceeds are split between the institution of the species' discoverer and field research projects in the country of the species' origin. BIOPAT-raised money, for instance, has funded surveys of bat populations in Sri Lanka, taxonomic training programs for

locals in Myanmar, and an inventory of Bolivian orchids in the Tariquia conservation area.

Potential BIOPAT customers surf an online catalog of plants and creatures. About 40 species of slugs, bugs, flowers, frogs, and others are currently available. Customers can even request a species with specific traits—a yellow orchid with violet stripes, for example—and a call goes out to Germany's museums and institutions that are members of BIOPAT. The customer also works with scientists to craft an appropriate species name and publish its description, which brings official recognition.

"We can arrange virtually any sponsorship," says Claus Bätke, BIOPAT's president and an agrobiologist with German development agency Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit. Most large

Most donors choose charismatic species—orchids and frogs account for about 50% of sponsorships. For example, BIOPAT enabled a friend of Mikhail Gorbachev to sponsor *Maxillaria gorbachevii*, a Bolivian orchid. Insects and other arthropods seem to spark little interest. An "ugly" spider from China has remained unnamed for 2 years, says Bätke.

Corporations have gotten into the act. The German food company Vitaquell named a Columbian hummingbird *Thalurania vitaquellii* and plans to use it in ads for low-fat margarine. BIOPAT will veto requests that it deems inappropriate. One potential customer tried to name a particularly unattractive insect after his mother-in-law, and another wanted to memorialize Nazi propaganda filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl with an orchid.

Not every group selling species' names is as successful as BIOPAT. The Immortals Program of the Australian Museum in Sydney, which funds biodiversity research, has attracted only eight donors since its launch in the late 1990s, raising approximately \$31,000.

BIOPAT itself got off to a rocky start, drawing fire from the U.K.'s International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN), which suggested that "name selling would

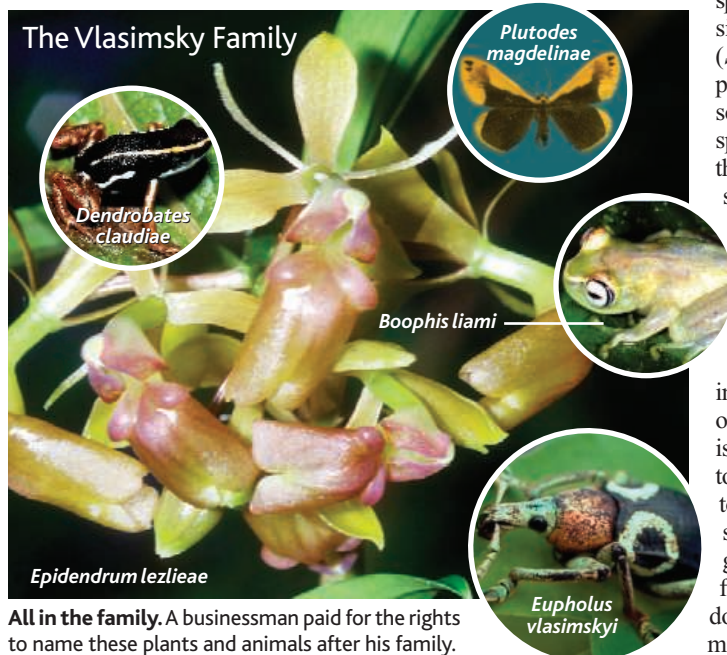
spread to those whose intention is simply their own financial gain" (*Science*, 18 February 2000, p. 1203). ICZN added that such a scheme could lead to fraudulent species descriptions and muddy the scientific naming system. No such abuses have arisen, however.

Still, Neal Evenhuis, the new president of ICZN, continues to share the concerns that his predecessors expressed. But he acknowledges that selling and auctioning species names is a symptom of how bad government funding is for taxonomy. "It's not as sexy to find a species anymore as it is to sequence its DNA," Evenhuis says. "BIOPAT are not the bad guys. Raising \$450,000 in this fashion in 4 years is a tremendous result in their effort to promote and further taxonomic research and conservation."

For Vlasimsky, the eponymous flowers, frogs, lizards, and bugs instill in his family a value for research and biodiversity. "My kids know they each have an animal and that this is important. They talk about this with their friends," he says. Conservation scientists also hope that such personal links will spur donors to make sure their namesakes survive.

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All in the family. A businessman paid for the rights to name these plants and animals after his family.

museums have drawers that have been stuffed for decades with species waiting for a taxonomist to describe, classify, and name them, Bätke explains. "We have several hundred unnamed insects here," adds Gerhard Haszprunar, a professor of systematic zoology at the University of Munich and director of the State Zoological Collection in Munich, who first came up with the naming idea. "We are always happy to give BIOPAT new species."