

The Tangle of Taxonomy

It may take a genius to figure out genus, but not knowing won't spoil the show.

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By Ann Japenga

THIS IS THE SECOND BIG BLOOM I've witnessed in the decade I've lived in the desert, and along with the expected euphoria I'm feeling oppressed. Tell me again what was that peach-colored flower that grows in the washes? How about the purple guys with the bendy giraffe necks?

It's not just flower names that vex me. What is the black bird that sits on the blooming ocotillo? And how about the names of all these butterflies drifting through to gorge themselves on pollen?

I'm certainly not the only one feeling the pressure in this era of naming chic. In recent years field guides have become as ubiquitous as laptops. And when it comes to celebrity, bird guide author David Allen Sibley is right up there with Bono.

Everyone has his or her own reasons for memorizing names — dominion, control, respect — and I sometimes worry that without the right labels I might be missing a lot that goes on around me. If I didn't recognize the palm *Washingtonia filifera*, for instance, I wouldn't know the creature that drops out of its fronds like a white bomb at dusk is a barn owl.

But still, in this season of botanical resurrection, I'm wondering if I should bother to learn more categories and lists. For one thing I'm just not that good at remembering names. Also, it's possible that I'd be closer to my goal — seeing more — with no names at all. As the poets and philosophers point out, language separates us from the natural world. It's the curse of Linnaeus.

It's also the curse of Adam. In a short story by Ursula K. Le Guin, Eve unnames all the animals. It was a logical, if rather insubordinate, move. Most of the animals accepted namelessness with "perfect indifference," Eve argued, since they never knew their names in the first place. The effect was immediate and pronounced. Take the fish in the ocean: "[T]heir names dispersed from them in silence throughout the oceans," writes Le Guin, "like faint, dark blurs of cuttlefish ink, and drifted off on the currents without a trace."

Eve's aim — like mine — is to be closer to the beasts. She yearns for a time when she could just lick a stone or pat a tortoise and just comprehend it. Of course, more modern peoples — cavemen, aborigines, rural folk — did all right without Linnaeus and Sibley. In fact, they undoubtedly knew more about natural forms than we do, although we will never know what that knowing felt like.

It is safe to assume that something happened inside our brains when we started slapping species, genus, family, order, class, phylum on spring wildflowers. We've now de-evolved to a point in which we need the name before we can see the stamen, pistil and petals for what they are.

This was demonstrated to me recently when my friend Mary Jo and I went walking in Hellhole Canyon near Borrego Springs. Mary Jo was telling me the names of the flowers and I was nodding "um-hmm" under a cold overcast, forgetting as quickly as I "um-hmmed."

But I came to attention when she pointed out a chia. It was a dark, punk flower apparently designed by Patti Smith. I bowed closer. Later, I began seeing chia in other places near home. They had been there all along, but I had never consciously seen this flower before Mary Jo told me its name. Could it be possible that if I abandon science in hopes of seeing more, I might never see anything?

In cultures less mechanical than ours, names can actually call out the very essence of a creature. It is something environmental philosopher Christopher Manes considers in "Other Creations." But the key to this magic, as he writes, is the names must be personal, not zoological. If this sounds farfetched, consider the transformation that happens when you call someone with a nickname. When I call the owl in my palm tree "Midge," for instance, I'm inviting her to become more than just another night bird.

One day in the midst of these musings, I surveyed the nearby hillsides and reviewed all the plant and animal names I know. Despite my species-deafness, I actually have absorbed quite a few labels since moving to the

desert: cholla, creosote, ocotillo, chuckawalla. I'm not hopeless, really, for a non-scientist. Then I looked up. The stars were appearing, and I didn't know their names.

Nor do I know all the names for snow that the Inuits have, or the names Hawaiians have for rain. What then about the nomenclature of clouds? The taxonomy of stone, feathers and wind?

As I teetered on the edge of unknowing, I realized this line of thinking had to stop. What am I really after? I simply don't want to miss the show, and the show is too big. So there amid the *Canis latrans* and the *Crotalus cerastes* exists a peach-colored flower, an owl named Midge and scores and scores of clouds, rocks and stars never to be named.