

John Smailie Tennant Lecture
2018



What's in a name?

The politics of plant systematics

Dr Peter de Lange



Thursday 24 May
6pm-7pm
Archway 2 Lecture Theatre
Union Street East
All Welcome

Globally Biosystematics is a dying science. In New Zealand there have been repeated calls for the Government to reinvest in biosystematics. Despite these calls investment in taxonomists, and the necessary career pathways for them to flourish continue to decline. As a result, we are losing not only our indigenous biodiversity but our hold on the nations biosecurity. This is affecting our global reputation as leaders in conservation management, as well as our overall image of being 'clean and green'. Further, as current science funding is competitive the potential for collaboration is lost – at a time when collaboration is increasingly recognised as the key to modern science discovery. In this climate the public is at the mercy of a beguiling level of 'misinformation' that would impress even the most devout moon-landing conspiracy theorist. Despite these trends and issues, globally with the advent of molecular systematics, electronic databases and high speed email communication there has been a rapid shift to competing 'global' flora classification schemes and databases which New Zealand has duplicated at a national level. With all these systems comes the need to decide on what names we are going to use for our Flora and the requirement for 'nomenclatural stability'. Yet in the competitive world of science funding there is also increasing pressure to ensure that funded outputs meet 'end users' needs. As taxonomists this is usually demonstrated by the uptake of the names we provide. Increasingly there is a vested interest in ensuring one's taxonomy is adopted. I contend that this 'need' is seriously damaging the reputation of the very science we feel is so important. The question then is whether there truly is an objective pathway to decide what names we use in this country?