

### Taxonomists? Who needs them?

Tim Entwistle

1 Taxonomists — people who earn their living from naming and classifying life — might seem dispensable. With 9m of the 11m or so living organisms on Earth yet to be catalogued they still have some work to do, but in an economically rationalised world this may not be seen as a huge priority.



2 39, having someone who can distinguish between the different mites that infect honeybees has already saved \$66m through better targeted biosecurity and management. Similarly, being able to detect early and accurately potential weed and pest species is worth many millions of dollars to farmers and park managers.

3 There is a clear and urgent need for taxonomy, and the taxonomists who do it. Which is why we should all be interested in a debate raging in the scientific arena around whether worldwide our taxonomic effort is increasing or decreasing. In Australia, we know we are losing taxonomists at the rate of two to three per year, and the workforce is definitely ageing. Worldwide, we are inarguably well shy of the effort needed to catalogue Earth.

4 It's been estimated that to discover and describe all species would take 300,000 taxonomists some 1,200 years, at a cost of more than \$350bn. And this is a conservative estimate.

5 If we are to direct our limited resources into conserving the most important parts of our biological diversity, how do we know which species and systems are the most important? Taxonomy.

6 As a community, we need to support taxonomy and its practitioners — if not to make our life better, then because our life depends on it.

*Guardian Weekly, 2015*