

Tribute to John Maddox

I concur with the opinion that John Maddox's multi-faceted views expressed in *Nature* were entertaining and informative¹. He also instilled confidence in scientists from non-English speaking nations. I consider myself as a beneficiary of his benevolence. Between 1986 and 1995, thirteen of my brief letters submitted to the scientific correspondence and regular correspondence sections in *Nature* passed his muster to get published. Maddox loved scientific ideas; he would dare to solicit these from anyone, including non-native English-speaking

scientists. When he retired, I acknowledged his benevolence by writing a limerick as follows:

There was an editor named John Maddox
whose pedigree derives from Sir Norman Locks²

The *Nature* he coded
got internationally moulded
and pushed aside much scientific parochial pox.

To my surprise, I did receive an acknowledgement from his secretary, with a one line note: 'Thank you for your good

wishes and for your amusing limerick, which I shall try to memorize³.

1. Balaram, P., *Curr. Sci.*, 2009, **96**, 1161–1162.

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Plant identification

Mankind is endowed with the precious gift of nature in all its magnificence, the indispensable treasure of plants. Identification and authentication of plants form the foundation for respite of the entire plant-based scientific information. Identification may virtually appear as simple as looking at a plant sample and telling the name, but it is an intricate and meticulous task of intelligible and skilled techniques involving trained experts, mainly scientists and botanists. For instance, about 17,000 species of flowering plants occur in India, each being circumscribed under a definite taxonomic group based on a set of diagnostic characters and necessitates a complete comprehension of diagnostic characters for accurate identification.

Plant identification efforts involve dedication and perseverance, with a vivid understanding of plant taxonomic procedures, wherein field experience serves as a value-addition. Identification commences with critical examination of diagnostic morphological characters, followed by meticulous matching, and re-matching of specimen with the pre-existing herbarium specimens. Dissection for critical assay of minutest vegetative and floral characters ensures accuracy. Perusal of the literature and flora consultation are essential for correct nomenclature, elaborate descriptions and

taxonomic keys to identification at various ranks.

The Botanical Survey of India, under the aegis of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, with its Headquarters in Kolkata, operates as the nodal agency for identification and authentication of plant specimens belonging to different institutions throughout the country, viz. pharmaceutical industries, chemical laboratories, excise/custom/police departments, universities and colleges, private parties, Ph D students, etc. However, while offering these services, the quality of plant samples provided is a vital feature, as poor-quality samples with decaying or microbe-infested plant parts pose a threat to the herbarium treasure house. It is therefore proposed here that institutions throughout the country must ensure the following prerequisites in favour of plant sample identification:

1. A minimum time period of 15–20 days may be spared for following proper identification procedures.

2. Specimens may be properly dried and poisoned in order to prevent contamination of other specimens.

3. Only those specimens complete in all respects, consisting of both vegetative as well as floral parts may be sent. If fruits are also available, this may serve as an ideal specimen.

4. Specimens may be supplemented with the entire field data recorded during collection.

5. Photographs, if possible, especially for specimens with features that may deteriorate (particularly in the case of aquatics or other species where features may be lost when the specimen is processed), would serve as a valuable repository of information on live plant.

6. Decayed and decomposed samples should not be sent.

7. Financial arrangements towards identification may be met with in time for receiving authentication certificate from the office.

8. Material for identification must be sent only when actually necessary, in order to save time and efforts involved.

9. It may be considered obligatory to receive the certificate once the specimen has been identified.

10. Any identified specimen on which some vital information is based may be deposited in some recognized herbarium for future reference.

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