

## DISCUSSION AND CORRESPONDENCE

DR. MONTGOMERY'S PROPOSED AMENDMENT TO  
THE RULES OF NOMENCLATURE

DR. MONTGOMERY'S communication to SCIENCE of July 5, seems to be based partly on a misconception of the meaning of the word "indication" in Art. 25, ¶ a.

This word is generally understood to cover cases where a name newly proposed is based (1) on a reference to a previously published description or figure; or (2) on a figure accompanying the new name; or (3) on a list of previously established species now first associated in a new group.

That a new name in zoology might be based on a mere reference to an otherwise unnamed specimen in a museum, is a proposition which would hardly be maintained by any one, and which Dr. Montgomery hardly needed to condemn.

But Dr. Montgomery's other suggestion, that a name must be accompanied by a description, and that this description must be "adequate" or the figure "recognizable," is a reversion to a state of mind from which, or rather from the consequences of which, modern nomenclature has been struggling for half a century to free itself. It would perhaps have been as well if the original requirement of some sort of a description had been maintained, not because the description in itself would have been of great value, but because this rule would have eliminated from consideration many publications which have added greatly to the complexity of nomenclatorial problems. However, it is too late now to recede, in regard to this point. But the determination of what is or is not "adequate," or "recognizable," would plunge the investigator into a morass of personal opinions which would render any attempt at a stable nomenclature hopeless. WILLIAM H. DALL

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## THE RULES OF NOMENCLATURE

IN SCIENCE of July 5, Dr. Montgomery so well stated the opinion held by naturalists who require that something more than an "indication" should accompany a name be-

fore it merits adoption into zoological nomenclature, that space need not be taken to elaborate his argument, and my purpose is only to lay stress upon an additional need which follows logically.

There will always be many to whom the proposition that in naming systematic groups we are naming objects, not concepts, is philosophically unacceptable, and to these persons concepts must be defined before they can be named. Such naturalists now and always will require that a generic name, like those of higher groups, must be associated with a definition which, as a concession to lack of knowledge at an earlier day, may be incomplete, but must not be actually erroneous or contradictory to the facts which at a later day it is sought to bring under it.

An example of the anomalous and absurd result sometimes reached by the contrary practise under the Draconian law of uncorrected priority is found in the water snakes. This group has been generally known under the name *Tropidonotus* Kuhl (1826). Cope in 1888 substituted *Natrix* Laurenti (1768) on the ground that while *Natrix* was a heterogeneous collection, its type was *Natrix vulgaris* (= *T. natrix*) the type of *Tropidonotus*, and in this he has been followed by some American herpetologists. Now Laurenti's definition of *Natrix* was as shapeless as definitions usually were in his time. Loosely rendered it is: "Head shielded with flat scales; flattened and triangular; the hinder part broad; in front contracted to the snout. Body smooth and shining; narrower behind the head; the middle between the head and end of tail much thicker. Tail conical, elongated and attenuated." The one character of value in identification, "*Truncus glaber nitidus*," is all there is in the definition that might not be applied to almost any snake known, and yet the method of "type by tautonomy" applies the name to a group having the exactly opposite character of most conspicuously rough, keeled scales. Indeed, few snakes are more at fault with Laurenti's language. Laurenti named under *Natrix* twenty-two species, of which eight are unrecognizable and the re-