

Preface

Lichenologists form a strange family within biology-at-large. They apparently stay together because of their common interest in lichens. This obvious idea, however, is a superficial one. We were told that lichens are nothing else than fungi, albeit clever ones. Which means that lichenologists are nothing else than mycologists... The long-lasting separation of lichenology and mycology was not healthy for the development of either discipline, especially for evolutionary taxonomy. This is why lichenologists are presently urged to spread into all possible different mycological symposia, rather than staying together. We used to call this process "dissemination".

Admittedly, in modern biology there is little space for a discipline defined by its mere object of study. "Botany" itself is disappearing as an autonomous science, why should lichenology make an exception?

Lichenologists, however, do stubbornly stay together. An impressive example of their stubbornness was the IAL4 Congress of Barcelona in September 2000. Hundreds of participants, no parallel sections, a firework of outstanding contributions throwing sparkles of light into the most disparate fields of biology. Most of those who attended IAL4 – as far as I know – have nothing against "dissemination". But they still feel that IAL meetings are a "must".

In my opinion, lichenologists stay together for two reasons.

One reason has to do with their history. Most of the participants to IAL4 were sons and grandsons of a handful Masters who survived the second War.

And these Masters were so great as to push their pupils forward outside lichen taxonomy in all possible directions. The result is that a "molecular" lichenologist can still exchange ideas with a colleague working in lichen communities of gravestones. Both have inherited a common language from history. Both can share experience and knowledge. Both can enjoy a rare event: the cross-fertilization within biology-at-large. Indeed, their stubbornness in staying together is good for modern biology.

The second reason is that the idea of lichens as "clever fungi" may be false. Why not "clever algae"? The decision that "taxanomically" lichens should be treated as fungi must not obscure the fact that – biologically – lichens are something more than that. They are one of the most perfect, stable and successful examples of symbiosis produced by evolution. The symbiotic part of a lichen's life lies in the deepest corner of its fungal soul. It is its most intriguing feature, even for those interested in fungal phylogeny only.

Here is a selection of articles from IAL4. Just a selection. But a well-done one. Most of these papers point to the "soul" of lichens, to their symbiotic way of life. Good material, indeed, for a journal called "Symbiosis"!

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