

The Physiology Lecture Series 2011



LIFE AS A SANCTIONED PROFESSIONAL KILLER: THE NEED TO KILL ANIMALS IN BIODIVERSITY RESEARCH

Russian dictator Josef Stalin once cynically proclaimed that "One death is a tragedy ... a million deaths is just a statistic." How true is this in biology – especially biodiversity research, when systematists who kill and preserve animals are often proclaimed to be "murderers". Unfortunately, in the field of biodiversity science, the killing and preservation of animal specimens for research is an integral part of the discipline. In the almost 30 years I have been in this field, thousands of crustaceans, fish and other animals have been killed in the name of "science", often at my explicit instruction. More so since university professors hold sway over many undergraduates, graduate students and junior scientists ... all become part of this "murderous" Mafia. Does that make me a "mass murderer"? And what has this "killing" achieved? How does "scientific killing" correlate with the "biodiversity crisis" facing the planet in which thousands of species are under threat of extinction? Are we not contributing to the slaughter and loss of species through our activities? If a biologist's desire is to conserve – how we possibly rationalize with this need to kill? In a wide-ranging and sometimes controversial talk, these seemingly conflicting aspects will be discussed and hopefully parsimonised.

Biography

Prof Peter Ng did his PhD in the National University of Singapore as a part-timer when he was still an education officer in the Ministry of Education in the 1980s. He joined NUS in 1990, and has been involved in biodiversity and systematics research, primarily with crabs and fish over the last 21 years, and has published hundreds of technical papers in this domain. He also works on a wide variety of different biodiversity issues, and in recent years, has become deeply involved in environmental and conservation biology. He is on the editorial board of over a dozen international journals, as well as being a member of numerous international biological organizations, notably the International Commission for Zoological Nomenclature. In NUS, he is concurrently director of the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research in the Faculty of Science, and the university's Tropical Marine Science Institute. He is also an executive member of NUS Environmental Research Institute, and sits on the advisory and scientific committees of several major NUS and government agencies and organisations.

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