Habitats of tiniest fish vanishing fast

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The article mentioned that skills were being lost as older taxonomists retired and fewer students picked up the discipline, scientists say the lack of funding and the growing popularity of molecular tools such as DNA sequencing, which can be used to tell different species apart, compound the problem, as does a shift towards other life sciences disciplines.

The trained taxonomist was among the first to describe and classify the world's smallest fish. Taxonomy is back-breaking work. For instance, National University of Singapore student Martin Chew, 23, spent hours dissecting dung-fly parts at the micro-scale, where an object is 100 times thinner than a human hair.

At least with surgery, you can see something. With this, you can't see anything," he said.

Yet, in an age of increasing-rapid habitat loss, being able to tell organisms apart from one another is even more important than ever.

Scientists have catalogued just 6 percent of the world's up to 30 million species, according to The Scientist article. They must race to find, name and classify the rest before they disappear.

Swedish biologist Carolus Linnaeus, the "Father of classification," developed the system of classifying organisms in the 18th century, founding modern taxonomy. The discipline still has a place in modern science, particularly in remote places where DNA tests and other complicated lab procedures are impractical.

For example, in the 1980s, researchers from Harvard University'smalaysia, who collaborated with Dr Tan to study Pseudocyclops, said the fish may have evolved to be so tiny because of its nutrient-poor environment.

The scientists compared Pseudocyclops with other fish in the same family, and discovered it was nesting boxes which appeared in other, larger fish at later stages of development. "If you mature at that young stage, you don't have to grow much or very long to reproduce," Brits explained. "That's an advantage when food is in short supply."

Now researchers are developing a system to classify the various species of Pseudocyclops based on patterns and shapes of their coloured spots and studying its breeding habits and development. So far, three species have been discovered, but there could be up to 12 because not all peat swamp areas have been studied.

The discovery of the world's smallest fish in 2006 put the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research on the world map, attracting attention from biological circles and international media.

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