

NAMES OF FISHES

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Commercial fishermen, the food processing industry, anglers, scientists, writers, Federal and State agencies, students and teachers and many others use names of fishes. Communication about these animals is impaired because some kinds of fishes have no names, others have more than one name, and some names are used for more than one kind of fish. The obvious solution would be for every species of fish to have one name that was universally recognized as referring to it alone. This article briefly discusses some of the causes of the confusion surrounding fish names.

Because they are essentially less complex, let us first consider scientific (Latin) names. The rules for the formation and use of scientific names are governed by the voluntary adherence of zoologists to the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature, most recently revised and published in 1964. In essence, the Code tells us that a zoologist who finds a species that lacks a scientific name may describe the species and give it a Latinized name (subject to certain rules and recommendations).

The name is composed of two parts. Let us take as an example the goldfish, Carassius auratus. Carassius is the generic name; one or more species may be included in the genus and will have Carassius as the first part of its scientific name. The second part, auratus, is the specific name and refers to only one species of Carassius. Both names together, Carassius auratus, make up the scientific name for the species that we recognize as the goldfish.

The starting point for scientific names is a book by the Swedish biologist Linnaeus, published in 1758. No scientific names published before that date are admitted to the system. If for any reason a zoologist gives a scientific name to a species that already has one, the name with the earliest date after 1758 takes precedence. If for any reason the same scientific name is given to two species, the last-named one must be given a new name. This system offers a relatively stable method of communication. Poisson rouge in French, chin-yü in Chinese, chrusoparon in Greek,

aranyhal in Hungarian, kingyo in Japanese, zolotoi ribki in Russian, and dorado in Spanish are all different names for what we call the goldfish. Communication about goldfish is difficult without the universally recognized Latin name, Carassius auratus. It is a worldwide code word.

International currency notwithstanding, scientific names cannot replace common names for several reasons. Latin has no meaning for the average person; having many words in a name is cumbersome; and scientific names are subject to change, for as well as being a way of communicating they serve as a working tool of the scientist who classifies animals, and as classifications change, scientific names may do likewise.

Common names serve a variety of purposes and arise in many ways. In fact, the only characteristic they share is that they are not Latin. To understand common names properly, we should consider the different kinds.

Local or folk names are the largest class of common names. They are deeply entrenched in the language of a region, and are often obviously descriptive, but sometimes their origins are lost in the past. They present as much variation within a single language as do goldfish names between languages. An example is Micropterus salmoides, widely known as the largemouth bass. In a study of the common names applied to the fishes of the bass and sunfish family, Smith in 1903 listed 53 different common names for this species. A few of them are: big-mouthed trout in Kentucky; chub in North Carolina and Virginia; cow bass and moss bass in Indiana; green bass in Minnesota; gray bass in Michigan; green trout in Louisiana; marsh bass, perch and pointed tail in Ohio; and peacock trout and jumper throughout the South. Of course, many of these names have died, but the fact that they once existed and were useful in communicating within a region illustrates what one writer (MacLeod, 1956) has described as "...colloquial names that have grown up spontaneously among ordinary people."

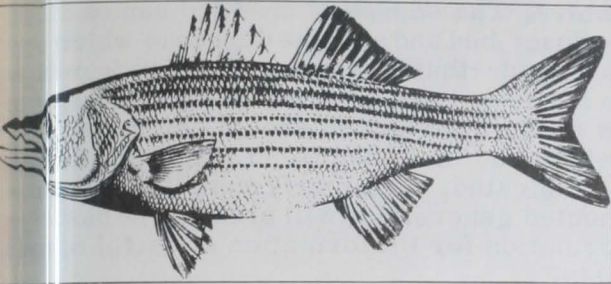


Fig. 4. *Morone saxatilis*. Rockfish in Maryland, striped bass in Oceania.

Another category of common names might be called coined or invented names. Many kinds of fishes are known to scientists alone and have only Latin names. If, in writing of one of these animals a common name is required, one is invented. The American Fisheries Society (1960) has listed all known kinds of fishes living in the United States and Canada to a depth of 100 fathoms. Some of the fishes on this list previously lacked any common name, and others shared a common name with one or more species. In order to insure a unique common name for every species on the list a number of names were invented. Another reason for inventing names is the importation into the United States of species from non-English speaking regions. The aquarium trade is the best example; a brief appraisal of any authoritative book on aquarium fishes (for example, Sterba, 1967) will show many fishes from South America and Africa for which English language names have been invented. In a recent popular booklet on Californian deepsea fishes, Fitch and Lavenex (1968) invented common names for species that previously lacked them. In some situations, scientists who describe a previously unknown species and give it a Latin name also invent a common name. This practice is very common in Japan.

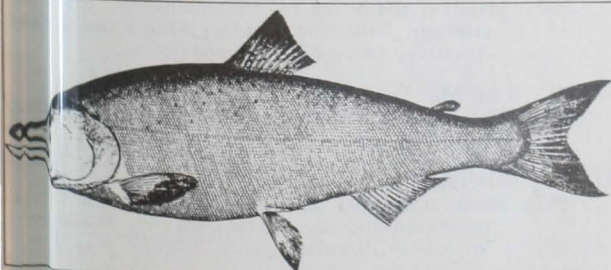


Fig. 5. *Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*. King salmon in California, sockeye in Alaska.

The chief problem, however, lies with fishes that have too many names rather than those that require invented ones. The commercial fishing industry, State and Federal agencies, and writers communicate

about fishes chiefly by using common names. When a species has more than one common name, and there is a clear need for only one, it may be a major undertaking to decide which should be used. In some instances one of many local names is selected, in others an invented name is chosen. The basic reason for the choice of any name should be that it is understood by the widest audience.

In the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries publication 'Fishery Statistics of the United States' (Lyles, 1966) a glossary is presented, which lists scientific and common names, including for many species alternative common names. The names used are those with which the Bureau is best able to communicate with the various segments of the fishing industry.

The Food and Drug Administration is concerned with names of food fishes and deals with a set of names that might be termed semilegal. This agency is charged with maintaining standards of identity and its regulations require that labeling must not be false or misleading. In deciding what common names may be used by the food processing and distributing industries, they select (when such exists) a name that is common or usual from the viewpoint of the general public who use and purchase fish products. Allowable names are decided on a case-by-case basis.

Because they often write for a wide audience, sportswriters are another group requiring common names that do not vary regionally. The Outdoor Writers Association of America (1962) has attempted to promote stability by publishing a list of scientific and common names of principal American sportfishes. Although they hope their common names are widely accepted, they have annotated their list and presented many widely used alternative names.

The scientific community depends chiefly on The American Fisheries Society (1960) list of U.S. and Canadian fishes, a comprehensive and authoritative guide to scientific names; however, its common name section is of limited value because of inadequate coverage of alternative common names.

Users of common names have strong attachments to the familiar. Names of objects are so important to us that we tend to merge the name with the idea of the object. The idea of a piece of leather tied around the foot,

and the name of the piece of leather as a shoe, are virtually inseparable. Therefore, in addition to serving as a shorthand way of communicating, names become part of the total concept of an object. Consider, for example, an angler who associates the fish that scientists know as *Micropterus salmoides* with the name green trout. If he is served in thinking about *M. salmoides* or in communicating with others about it by the name green trout, and if the name largemouth bass has no meaning, then to him green trout is that kind of fish, official pronouncements notwithstanding.

If communication problems increase, the number of official lists of names may do likewise. When common names are required for legal reasons or other special purposes, a single name for each species is clearly desirable, and special lists will fill a real need in designating names that offer the best communication value for a particular purpose. A general list of fish names should serve a very different purpose. It may recommend a preferred name, but its chief function should be to report on and cross-index names that actually are used. The worth of any general list of names as an aid to communication and understanding is only as great as the scope of its coverage of alternative names and the basic documentation it presents. A general list should first of all tell its users whether names are invented or folk

names. The source of invented names should be described and also the degree to which they are used--that is, whether they are found only in books or have entered the spoken language as well. Folk names should be presented by region and their degree of usage should also be indicated. A properly compiled and documented general list will present the basic information for the formation of useful special lists.

In summary, names of fishes are basically of two kinds, invented and folk names. Scientific names are invented and are usually, but not always, stable; however, they are not suitable for everyday use. Some common names are also invented and may be important, especially for fishes imported from foreign language regions. Folk names may vary regionally. They originate in many ways and their usage is often deeply rooted. Various segments of the common-name-using public often use different names for the same species or the same name for different species. Because many common names have a high communication value and have also become part of the idea of the animal, it will probably be impossible for each species to have one common name that refers to that species alone. Use of common names for special purposes has not been attempted to list the names that serve the best. A well-documented general list, including alternative names, is needed.

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