

TDWG Newsletter

International Working Group on Taxonomic Databases for Plant Sciences

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Standards: How serious are we?

by Bob Allkin

Standards are "in". Noone can hold their head up high without an SQL interface to their database! Only fools fail to keep abreast of the latest developments in the two - or was it three? - "alternative standards" proposed for the UNIX operating system. The "Open systems" paradise lies just around the corner. Cutting the hype however, what ARE the benefits to users? One jaundiced observer wrote that standards were a good place to diverge from. Manufacturers are perceived to follow standards as a marketing strategy and to develop new standards only to control them.

Are we in TDWG making an unqualified commitment to see that standards meet the user's needs? I firmly believe this NOT to be the case, but how are we perceived from outside?

It is facile to observe that standards ultimately become accepted through use and not through any rubber stamping exercise. However, TDWG's responsibility is to promote as full and as informed a debate as possible on the purpose, form and content of proposed standards. Time and care alone give us hope for avoiding unnecessary limitations or inappropriate standards. The portability of programs among standard DOS machines is a great advance but who in their right minds would otherwise choose DOS as an operating system? DOS just happened - it wasn't planned - and it shows.

TDWG faces a dilemma balancing this need for caution and full debate against the need to produce results quickly to gain credibility. Botanists

from within TDWG, as well as from outside, frequently comment that unless "standard X is published by tomorrow" they will have to go their own way. Biological data management on a large scale is fortunately only just taking off - but things are moving fast.

Our community is grossly underestimating the effort and investment required to establish worthwhile standards. Don't complain that standard Y has not yet appeared ask yourself how many hours YOU have devoted to the debate? How many man-hours has your own institute invested in developing any of the current TDWG initiatives? Debate at a large meeting just once a year is inadequate and meets neither the need for detailed and precise discussion nor for rapid results. Such a meeting can only concern itself with the organisational aspects and with a general debate of standards while the subgroups should be where the real work goes on.

So, how serious are we? A professional approach demands that we seek the necessary resources. The annual investment made by the computing industry in bringing their teams of technical staff together to work for weeks at a time developing or just maintaining standards may be an unrealistic comparison. Nevertheless, can we currently claim to be providing a forum for informed debate, let alone a vehicle for the development, publication, dissemination and maintenance of standards?

The membership fee will raise funds to cover some secretarial costs but not resolve the basic problem. I also fear, as an aside, that it risks adding

Note des éditeurs

Once again, we had very (!) few papers sent by TDWG members, result is the reduced size of our Newsletter. It's a pity, because it was assumed that this publication would act as a link between members, a way to communicate, to prepare or comment the meetings. Unfortunately, it seems that there is very little activity between one year's meeting and the next. So, one could ask "is this Newsletter really useful?". Shouldn't we devote some time to discuss this point during the coming meeting. @

insult to injury. Would you pay for the privilege of being a member to receive a printed copy of, or attend meetings to discuss, a standard for which you have given up numerous evenings to develop?

We must as a high priority devote attention to

- seeking major funding from agencies and private foundations e.g. through our parent body IUBS. Surely a collaborative project of this nature is attractive to such funding agencies?
- publicising our activities more widely within the biological community and opening up membership to spread the work load and costs,
- lobbying within our own institutes for a real commitment to supporting the necessary grind involved in working and reworking standards - however unglamorous and unproductive from a short term view. Support means diverting already scarce manpower and resources from other projects. @

Preparing for the next five years

by

C. Zellweger, B. von Arx, R. Allkin, K. Walter, W. Loader

Next year will see the first "open" conference sponsored by TDWG on "Global Designs" and will also see the fifth anniversary of TDWG's birth in Geneva. This is an opportunity to reflect on the structure and function of this young "monster" that we have all created. We recognise and applaud the efforts and enthusiasm of past and present TDWG officers who have guided and orchestrated us into activity, but fear that TDWG is now in danger of losing its way, or at least of losing an opportunity to firmly establish itself as an independent body with a real influence upon botanical data management practice within the community.

The importance and urgency of establishing standards has increased significantly over the last five years. Our "founder members" in Geneva were a relatively select band of projects and institutions that were to a large extent pioneering the way. No longer are databases created by the select few; no longer are TDWG members so clearly in advance of the others efforts. Each week a new project starts. A depressing fraction of these apparently start without any knowledge of our activities or find that we have no suitable standard yet available. Each represents another step toward the anarchy we seek to avoid.

We suggest that TDWG can no longer afford to depend on the efforts of just one or two hard working individuals on a "part-time" basis. More active participation by all of us as members is essential along with a different approach to respond effectively to these increased pressures.

To encourage debate we here make some tentative suggestions for a new *modus operandi* to spread the load more evenly among us, to provide a basis for a more stable future for TDWG and to add a greater sense of urgency to creating standards.

PROPOSAL 1: That a Council be

established to direct TDWG. This group would be responsible for setting the agenda for meetings, for the development of TDWG and a STRATEGY, and for coordinating the technical subgroups.

The Council would meet relatively frequently: e.g. three times a year - the meetings to be held shortly after, in between, and shortly before, the general TDWG meetings.

The Council would consist of about half a dozen people, each with a distinct responsibility. For example...

- Nomenclatural and Taxonomic standards
- Data Standards - Taxon based
- Data Standards - Specimen based
- Data Exchange Protocols
- Bibliographic and other source materials
- Geographic Standards
- Promotion of TDWG (Newsletter/Publications/Acceptance in community)
- Fund Raising

The Council would be elected and membership would rotate. The president and vice president would come from among the Council members, the former chairing TDWG general meetings.

Other rules might be thought desirable e.g. limiting the number of Council members from any one institute, the max. period for council membership, or arranging that the vice president automatically assume office from the retiring president etc.

PROPOSAL 2: That the Council would receive support from a Secretariat having a purely administrative function. The Secretariat would embrace two roles: those of secretary and treasurer who might be based in one place.

The Secretary would be responsible i) for recording the minutes of the

General TDWG meetings and the Council meetings, ii) making arrangements for meetings in collaboration with the host institution and iii) for distributing the minutes, TDWG mailings, and registration details etc. The Treasurer would manage funds, collect membership fees and advise on matters financial.

The Secretary and Treasurer would not have voting rights on Council and might be more permanent. Ideally these would be part-time salaried positions.

PROPOSAL 3: That technical subgroups report to the appropriate member of Council before each Council meeting.

PROPOSAL 4: That in Las Palmas we consider the question of membership once more. Who has a right to membership? Who has a right to vote in elections or on standards? Which if any classes of member must pay a registration fee?

We hope these proposals will provoke a response and that there will be an opportunity for others to express their ideas in Las Palmas. Our aim is to involve more people and impart a greater urgency to our activities. @



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