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The MexBOL initiative

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In 2005, Mexican researchers were invited to participate in the Barcode of Life Initiative. A few researchers showed interest in the initiative then, and in 2007, Paul Hebert from the University of Guelph in Canada came to Chetumal and Mexico City and presented his proposal to the scientific community of Mexico. Initially there were mixed feelings, especially because of the complexities of plant genetic marker development and concerns regarding the traditional practice of taxonomy along with the lack of support for scientific collections, but most researchers showed a strong interest. Paul Hebert was impressed with the enthusiasm shown by researchers and by the research infrastructure for biodiversity studies that Mexico already has.

In 2007, Paul Hebert also contacted Mexican officials in two relevant government agencies: CONACYT, the National Council on Science and Technology, and CONABIO, the National Commission for Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity. Officials from CONACYT, Mtro. Juan Carlos Romero-Hicks and Dr Antonio de la Peña, showed enthusiasm for the initiative and decided to give their full support in Mexico. Dr José Sarukhan from CONABIO was also positive about this prospect.

In the meantime, three groups of researchers with their directors also approached CONACYT to express their interest in the Barcode of Life Project. These research groups were affiliated with three relevant institutions: the Institute of Biology at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) which houses many important biological specimen collections in Mexico; El Colegio de la Frontera Sur (ECOSUR), whose academic community has developed a strong interest in DNA barcoding, and which also houses regional collections; and the Centro de Investigaciones Biologicas del Noroeste (CIBNOR), which also showed a strong interest in the initiative. These three academic institutions became local nodes for the MexBOL campaign and together with CONABIO form the basis of this initiative. With basic funding support by CONACYT, researchers and students working on Mexican biodiversity are the main developers of these nodes.

The year 2009 was quite important for the MexBOL initiative. CONACYT formalized their support through an official network of researchers and a network committee, and this agency also gave strong support for the organization of the Third International Barcode of Life Conference hosted by the Institute of Biology of UNAM in Mexico City on 7–13 November 2009, and organized by the Consortium for the Barcode of Life (CBoL) based at the Smithsonian Institution. During the conference, a symposium on the Mesoamerican Barcode of Life was held. Several presentations were given by institutional or country representatives (e.g. IBUNAM, ECOSUR, Guatemala, Nicaragua), and other presentations were offered by individual researchers including guests, with the topics ranging from sea life to fungi, and from planning projects such as medicinal plants to more advanced programs such as the Guanacaste project in Costa Rica developed by Daniel H. Janzen and his colleagues. Consequently, the participants of the Mesoamerican Barcode of Life Symposium were invited to present their work in a special issue of the journal *Mitochondrial DNA*. We hope that the papers produced from this symposium

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demonstrate the promise of DNA barcoding as it can be applied to a megadiverse region like Mexico. *Mitochondrial DNA* is indeed pleased to publish the proceedings of this symposium so that the scientific community at large can learn of the advances in Mesoamerica that can be accomplished using DNA barcoding. Organismal systems examined in this issue comprise a multitude of invertebrates (i.e. flukes, flatworms, parasitoid wasps, leeches, butterflies, weevils), mammals (opposums), and plants (cycads).

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