

Neonics ban tied to corrupted bee research by scientists at EU's ethically-challenged IUCN?

David Zaruk is an environmental-health risk policy analyst based in Brussels, the hub of Europe-wide government, specializing in the role of science in policy and societal issues. He blogs under the pseudonym: The Risk-Monger. He recently released an internal document from the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which challenged the assumed view by many politicians in Brussels that neonicotinoids are responsible for the assumed decline in bee populations. It showed how, in 2010, certain activist scientists launched a strategy to run a campaign built around a series of planned “independent” research publications that they hoped would result in the ban of neonics.

Within a day of publishing the internal document and the first part of his investigation, one of the scientists behind the IUCN Taskforce on Systemic Pesticides threatened and then started legal proceedings against him. The blog host in Brussels, EurActiv, took his article down. Then, as the GLP reported on Thursday, the [Times of London reported](#) the key findings of Zaruk's story, calling it one of the biggest scientist scandals since ClimateGate. EurActiv agreed to restore the blog, conditioned on an “apology”, which he amended to this report. When I asked Zaruk how he felt about the circus, he said: “Welcome to Brussels”.

Here is Zaruk's article, the first article in a multi-part series scheduled to appear on EurActiv, and reproduced in full for the Genetic Literacy Project:

The Risk-Monger recently came across a strategy document carelessly left on-line by activist scientists that lies at the heart of the founding of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Taskforce on Systemic Pesticides. The [Addendum to this document \(see page 3\) spells out a rather distasteful anti-neonicotinoid campaign strategy lacking in scientific integrity](#). The process has been tried and tested before by activists, but their behaviour has never been so clearly articulated in writing. I thought this document should be shared so we know the type of people are standing behind the “science” defending the bees.

[Note: The Genetic Literacy Project's Jon Entine uncovered a similar case of possible research corruption in the United States in an investigation of the disputed studies on neonics and bees by [Harvard nutritionist and organic activist Chensheng Lu](#).]

How did this story unfold?

- Under the auspices of the IUCN, a group of activists map out a four-year campaign strategy to attack the pesticide industry and seek the banning of neonicotinoids.
- The idea is to collect like-minded researchers, get funding to set up a task-force to attack neonics using the IUCN as a base with WWF (or some other NGO) doing the lobbying.
- Once funding is in place for the campaign organisation, start the research, write a main high-impact report and get a few other articles published (find some big names to use).

- On that basis, organise a broader campaign (with the support of several high-impact PR specialists) to promote their anti-neonic publication.
- Brace for reactions and blowback from other scientists and industry.

One little issue to note: no credible scientist starts with a campaign strategy and then conjures up some evidence as an afterthought to fit his or her activist agenda. That is not science! It is lacking in integrity and detrimental to the reputation of researchers the world over, which this band of activists were quite happy to decimate for a chance to play politics.

They were also more successful than they would have ever have imagined, getting neonics banned in the EU 16 months ahead of their strategic plan. The Risk-Monger would like to examine their document and consider why these activists not only lack scientific best practices, but also why policymakers should run clear of using their contrived research as evidence.

The story starts in 2010 during a meeting at the IUCN offices in Switzerland.

On the 14th June 2010 Prof. Goeldlin and Dr. Bijleveld met in Switzerland with Dr. Simon Stuart, Chairman of the IUCN Species Survival Commission and Ir. Piet Wit, Chairman of the IUCN Ecosystems Management Commission.

Based on the results of the meeting in Paris the following was agreed that the four key research papers will be published in peer-reviewed journals. Building on these papers a research paper will be submitted to Science (first choice) or Nature (second choice) which would introduce new analyses and findings across the scientific disciplines to demonstrate as convincingly as possible the impact of neonicotinoides (sic) on insects, birds, other species, ecosystem functions, and human livelihoods.

So scientists who cannot even spell “neonicotinoids” are planning to get new research and findings that will “demonstrate, as convincingly as possible” that neonics are a risk. A risk to what? To anything and everything they can find. The goal is not science here, but to conjure up some evidence to fit the objective of banning neonicotinoids. A credible scientist would do research, gather evidence and draw conclusions. An activist scientist would start with a dogmatic conclusion and look for the evidence to prove his or her political point.

The IUCN activist strategy document continues:

This high-impact paper would have a carefully selected first author, a core author team of 7 people or fewer (including the authors of the initial four papers), and a broader set of authors to give global and interdisciplinary coverage. A significant amount of the supporting evidence will be in the official Supporting Online Material accompanying the paper. A parallel « sister » paper (this would be a shorter Policy Forum paper) could be submitted to Science simultaneously drawing attention to the policy implications of the other paper, and calling for a moratorium in the use and sale of neonicotinoid pesticides (sic). We would try to pull together some major

names in the scientific world to be authors of this paper.

So after conjuring up some evidence, this activist group of researchers would then select a few big names to pose as authors. For those readers who had assumed that scientists worked on the material that they published in peer review journals, well, they actually do. These are not real scientists, but what the Risk-Monger, in a previous blog, has dubbed “activist scientists” whose antics, whether it is on endocrine disruption, GMOs, chemicals or this subject, neonicotinoids, is not at all credible or scientific. Their plan to pull together some major names for a Policy Forum paper (which their friends at Science will also apparently gladly publish) are not intended to advance the body of research in the field of neonicotinoids; are not intended to further scientific discovery; are not intended to enhance knowledge and human understanding – those would all be noble scientific objectives. Rather, the goal is to call “for a moratorium in the use and sale of neonicotinoid pesticides”. That is not science at all! That is politics (and activist scientists somehow do not understand that such behaviour is deceptive, unethical and damaging to the reputation of science). By the way, the journal Science didn’t fall for this nonsense and did not publish it, nor did Nature.

[how_to_create_a_neonics_controversy](#)

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I really wish that someone made this text up as a joke, but this document came off of the website of one of the activist scientists, Henk Tennekes. As I suspect they will quickly take the document off line, here is a PDF of the text (see page 3): [Resumé INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP ON NEONICOTINOIDS](#)
Comments Henk Tennekes— or see the screenshot image above with link stamp . There is no “For internal use only” label anywhere on the document, so the Risk-Monger recognised it as a public document. Why Tennekes felt it practical to leave such evidence on the Internet quite simply baffles me. Do they think that their noble quest to save the bees makes them impervious to judgement or needing to behave acceptably? Do they get, at all, what scientific integrity means?

The generals in the war-room continue their strategy:

If we are successful in getting these two papers published, there will be enormous impact, and

a campaign led by WWF etc could be launched right away. It will be much harder for politicians to ignore a research paper and a Policy Forum paper in Science.

So once the carefully chosen data is published, we bring in the attack dogs to hit those bastards hard. Since this was a meeting at the IUCN, the weapon of choice was obvious – their daughter NGO lobbying group, WWF. One of the two authors of this strategy document, Maarten Bijleveld, also happened to be a founding member of WWF in the Netherlands. It must have disappointed him to no end that WWF decided to pass on such a salacious bone, but I suppose after the IPCC Himalaya-gate, WWF also have to vet whom they refer to as scientists.

The IUCN, however, did not give this activism a pass and it should be noted that while they pretend to be the credible voice of international conservation, the IUCN's support of such a mercenary band of anti-scientific activists shows they are as much a pig in the mud as Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth.

It all comes down to winning the lobbying campaign, as the next part of the strategy document demonstrates:

The most urgent thing is to obtain the necessary policy change to have these pesticides banned, not to start a campaign. A stronger scientific basis for the campaign will hopefully mean a shorter campaign. In any case, this is going to take time, because the chemical industry will throw millions into a lobbying exercise.

This is the tried and tested activist technique (think Séralini on GMOs). If you want to win a campaign, first go out and create some science. If you can get a few big names to support your science, it makes the campaign shorter and more successful.

What infuriates the Risk-Monger is how naïve their view of industry is. This is not a game and their ideas on how they can win are irresponsible and offensive. That industry will just throw millions into a lobbying exercise (like it is nothing and there is no point to it all) is truly ridiculous. If the chemical industry has a product or substance with weak science or a poor sustainability record, they will not throw millions at it – they will abandon it. Industry is forced to lobby when activist scientists like these conjure up evidence in an attempt to damage the reputation or sales of their products, technologies or business. When companies believe their products are safe, beneficial and irreplaceable, they will do what they can to defend it. At Solvay, we “threw millions” at defending chlorine because we knew it was safe, has saved billions of lives (look at how it has been used to stop the spread of Ebola today) and has done an enormous amount of good for society.

That activists think they can just keep attacking these products or substances (think also GMOs) until companies like Solvay just give up and let them win is narrow-minded and disgusting. Syngenta and Bayer Crop Science are doing what they can to defend neonics, not because it is a game, but because they know the value of the products and understand how safe they are (as farmers will always need to protect their crops, these companies could just as easily make profits selling older, more toxic products). Just ask the farmers in the UK, who have lost a considerable amount of their oilseed rape crop in the first

year of the neonic ban, if they think this is simply a lobbying exercise! It is not a game nor an exercise (except, perhaps, to these activist scientists).

The activist scientist strategy document concludes:

In order to prepare for the paper to be submitted to Science it is necessary to plan it simultaneously with the first four more detailed papers (to be sure that the first four papers do not unintentionally undermine the proposed high-impact one). A small meeting is therefore needed to do the necessary planning including the authors of the first four papers, David Gibbons/Mark Avery, Maarten Bijleveld, Pierre Goeldlin, the IUCN SSC and CEM Chairs (or their designates) and one or two people experienced in high-impact publishing (such as Ana Rodriguez).

Pierre Goeldlin / Maarten Bijleveld

Notre Dame de Londres/ Clarens, 15th July 2010

Unlike traditional research processes, where evidence is gathered and then published, read in journals by scientists, cited in other works to help advance the scientific body of knowledge, activist scientists directly employ people experienced in “high-impact publishing” – in other words, PR hacks. Ana Rodriguez was apparently not available or interested, so perhaps she referred them to one of her colleagues, communications specialist, [Laura Maxim](#). Although not a bee scientist, she seems to have been prolifically publishing papers on bees with activist scientists since 2010. One of her unique achievements has been serving as co-author with Jeroen Van der Sluijs (head of the scientific committee of the IUCN Task Force on Systemic Pesticides, although himself, also, not a bee scientist) on the chapter on the threat to bees in the European Environment Agency’s second volume of Late Lessons from Early Warnings. Mystifying!

The second “high-impact” PR hack to serve the bee-activists is none other than Mirella von Lindenfels, one-time media head for Greenpeace who now runs a communications PR firm out of the UK. She was the one employed to set up the [communications platform](#) and the launch of the IUCN Task Force on Systemic Pesticides back in June of this year. If the name Mirella von Lindenfels sounds familiar to the readers of this blog, it might be worth going back a few years when she was responsible for setting up another activist science front group known as IPSO – The International Programme on the State of the Oceans. In 2011, she was supporting a renegade activist scientist who wanted to build up an international sounding scientific body, but when she published the names of the 26 international scientists, the Risk-Monger and other bloggers discovered that very few of them were actually scientists (although several of them were affiliated with IUCN). This time around, Mirella learnt her lesson and is not publishing the list of scientists belonging to the IUCN Task Force on Systemic Pesticides. I have written to her office and to the IUCN to get a copy of the member list. Neither has replied to my request. Canny? Yes. Transparent? No.

And this is how, in 2010, the IUCN Task Force on Systemic Pesticides began.

Restore Credibility for Science

The Risk-Monger is quite alarmed to see scientists behaving in such a manner and is calling for the following:

- These activist scientists should be ostracised from the scientific community. Journals should refuse to accept papers for peer review submitted with the names of these campaigners.
- Scientific bodies and academies need to be more diligent in policing non-scientific activities of their members. Their campaigning only hurts the credibility of such scientific bodies and journals who publish them and must be sanctioned.
- We have to be aware that activist science (research that prioritises politics rather than evidence) is not reliable for risk assessments, policymaking or media attention. Once brandished as activist science, the data and information should be recategorised as politics and not science. If industry scientists are excluded for lacking objective neutrality, then excluding such activists is a no-brainer.
- There is, now more than ever, the need to restore the post of Chief Scientific Adviser in the European Commission. The role of Anne Glover was to sort out the policy activists from the credible scientists before they can influence policymakers. That she did not give in to the activist scientists' malicious personal campaign tactics had no doubt caused her a lot of personal grief.
- Policymakers need to go back and assess where their decisions may have been contaminated by activist science and rectify it, whether it is at the IPCC (eg, Himalaya-gate), GMOs or the ban on neonicotinoids. In the US, many activists and several congressmen are citing this IUCN taskforce as the basis for a similar ban on neonics. They cannot be serious!

Ethical challenge

Unlike credible researchers who follow guidelines based on Good Laboratory Practice (GLP) or industry scientists, who, on top of GLP, follow industry-wide codes of ethical conduct, these activist scientists do not feel compelled to behave in an ethical manner. The Risk-Monger has been calling long and hard on NGOs to join the civilised world and impose ethical rules on the behaviour of their campaigners and scientists (do not lie, do not falsify evidence, accept facts, behave responsibly ...). They absolutely will not, as they feel that their beliefs in saving the planet override any need to respect basic principles of humanity. But in the questionable behaviour of the founding members of the IUCN Taskforce on Systemic Pesticides, humanity should ask whether they, in turn, deserve respect.

NOTE: After the publication of the original post on the popular Belgian blog EurActiv, the blog temporarily pulled down the post, and asked David Zaruk to amend an “apology” after which they would repost his investigation:

Addendum (added 3 December 2014)

A public apology to Jean-Marc Bonmatin

Dear Dr Bonmatin

EurActiv has forwarded your charges of criminal proceedings against me for the above blog which you have deemed personally insulting and also insulting to your employers. I have forwarded them to my

lawyer and he was rather confused, given that, as a blog covering the history of the formation of the IUCN taskforce, you were not involved, nor were you mentioned in the exposé I have written, nor have I insulted your employer (although to your request, I removed the name of your organisation as an act of good faith) – I have no idea what the other organisation is, but as you say you are an expert tied to them, apparently my actions have also insulted them and they are also joining in said criminal proceedings. My lawyer feels that I do not need to remove the blog (BlogActiv asked me to soften the language a bit, which I had done), but that I should, in any case, make a public apology for any insult you may have suffered from my analysis of a 2010 document. I am sorry, and in my next blog, I promise not to assess your scientific qualifications as part of the analysis of the IUCN taskforce, you have demonstrated in your letter (which out of respect to you, I will not publish) that you are clearly a credible scientist. I regret that you had inferred from my analysis of a document you were not involved in, that I was questioning your research.

As a point of mutual respect, I hope you agree with me that debates should never be behind closed doors (whether it is from activists or industry lobbyists). Having the debate about whether the IUCN taskforce has gathered the best scientists in the field should not be done in a courtroom nor in a backroom political situation. I would therefore like to invite you to come to Brussels to debate me or others about your science, in the Parliament or my university or at an NGO office. You can also express your views about the above strategy document – I welcome your views on other points as well (like a Chief Scientific Adviser or an activist code of ethics) – the Risk-Monger concept is based on the idea that debate sometimes needs to be provoked, and if you disagree with me, that is wonderful – if I can strengthen your arguments against me by being a focal point, then the chief goal of dialogue has been attained. Going to a lawyer to try to shut me up is, I hope you can agree, Dr Bonmatin, not a very efficient form of dialogue. A little while ago, you had declared neonicotinoids to be the new DDT. I am sure you would not want the lawyers from Syngenta and BayerCropScience to engage in a similar form of dialogue with you.

Looking forward to meeting you in public for a robust debate.

NOTE: A version of this article appeared first on EurActiv [here](#).