

## Bee-gate: European IUCN task force mired in corruption scandal over neonics ban plot

**David Zaruk is an environmental-health risk policy analyst specializing in the role of science in policy and societal issues. He blogs under the pseudonym: The Risk-Monger. Last week, Zaruk posted an internal document from the International Union for Conservation of Nature, which 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 neonicotinoids (neonics), claiming that bees faced mortal danger from their use in agriculture. Zaruk’s analysis of that document and its implications are detailed in PART I [HERE](#). He continues his investigation in PART II, below:**

In the [last blog](#), Part I, I presented a document showing how the IUCN Taskforce on Systemic Pesticides (TFSP) was created on a rather unscientific motivation: to advance the campaign to ban neonicotinoid pesticides. This is what I have referred to as activist science – a politically motivated endeavour of putting the conclusions before the evidence for the purpose of advancing an activist campaign. In this blog, I will examine this group of anti-neonic scientists, how they publish and push their work and how they are funded. It will be interesting to see how, with their agenda-driven (and non-transparent) financial sources, they can still consider themselves as free from conflict of interest.

**[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](#).]**

### Peer Review?

The IUCN Taskforce on Systemic Pesticides has demonstrated how activist scientists can exploit the weaknesses in the peer review process. The group is set up like a private club of like-minded researchers who publish articles citing each other and recommending each other to peer review their papers. See a good example of how they promote themselves (amongst themselves) in a recent contribution by [Hank Campbell in Science 2.0](#) (and read the eye-opening discussion section). If one needs any further proof of how this taskforce confirms their bias among themselves, look at the list of references at the end of the [“high-impact” concluding publication](#). Of the total of 14 sources, 10 were to articles from the same very authors of the report. Was there really so little other credible science out there that they had to keep referencing themselves?

We must keep in mind that the IUCN taskforce has not generated new research, but is merely an extensive literature review (literature reviews are a notoriously subjective process given the volume of articles that could be omitted by the pre-determined selection criteria), so if they are citing each other regularly, then it should not come as a surprise that in any literature review, their own works might take pride of place.

Also in a closed circle of peers, after repeating the same things to each other, it is normal to share a

certain confirmation bias. Notice the contributions in the comments sections from the IUCN taskforce scientists who engaged Hank Campbell or my last post – they were regularly inciting the high probability of apocalyptic biodiversity collapse. While I am sure they truly believe that this is a crisis of epic proportions, nobody else in the scientific community is speaking like that. This is a common risk when polarised scientists stay within their comfort silos.

Some curious things about this above-mentioned and long-awaited “high impact” publication.

- It was sadly neither published in Science nor Nature (as the 2010 anti-neonic strategy document had expected), but instead, the journal of [Environmental Science and Pollution Research](#). Rather than being in the upper echelon of scientific publications, this tepid, dare I say mediocre journal is an open-source, pay-per-publish service (it has an Impact Factor of 2.76 – for comparison, Science has an Impact Factor of 31.48 and Nature has 42.35 – Impact Factor, to simplify, is based on the average number of citations each article receives). Environmental Science and Pollution Research’s publisher, Springer (along with IEEE), recently had to retract 120 articles from open-source journals for being [computer-generated gibberish](#). Was this high impact paper even subjected to a peer review?
- The peer review process at Environmental Science and Pollution Research turned this IUCN taskforce paper into a high-impact publication in an eye-popping six days from reception. Sorry, but even the Risk-Monger’s blogs take longer to fact-check (and he is far from high impact!).
- The conclusions at the end of this scientific publication include such knowledge sharing recommendations as: we must grow more organic food; “educate” farmers that pesticides do not work (no farmers were involved in this research evidently); and use the precautionary principle to ban neonicotinoids. Was this high-impact article even fact-checked?

The sad thing today is that nobody in government agencies or the media read anymore. They just see a series of letters after someone’s name and a long list of publications and they assume that these activist scientists are legitimate enough upon which to base policies and news articles.

### **Who are the IUCN Taskforce activist scientists?**

It may seem strange that the website promoting this IUCN taskforce [does not actually present the members of the taskforce](#). I contacted the Taskforce Science Coordinator and got a reply (from someone else) that the 30 authors of the high-impact publication are indeed the members of the Taskforce (although in a letter where the Taskforce Chairman [requested if his group could join the UN](#), he mentioned 49 members). Other bee scientists have asked to join this IUCN taskforce but have been informed that it is not open to new members. I suppose trying to present a scientific consensus against neonicotinoids is too important to risk allowing other scientists with opposing views to be involved. So as we are to understand that these 30 members are the best scientists in the field of bee research, it shouldn’t be unexpected that someone should take a look at some of their accreditations, expertise and achievements.

I should begin by noting that many of the scientists on the TFSP are credible researchers who have had a long history of research on bees, bee field trials and studies on various causes of possible bee decline apart from neonicotinoids. But not all of them and not the most apparently active or vocal ones.

The IUCN Taskforce on Systemic Pesticides' Scientific Coordinator is **Dr Jeroen van der Sluijs**. This might be considered a strange choice for some as Dr van der Sluijs does not have a long history of bee research or field trials. I have to wonder if he has led any field trials. On his [Twitter page](#), he lists his interests as: Post Normal Science, scientific controversy, scientific uncertainty, emerging risks, science & ethics, NUSAP, science policy interface. No bees mentioned at all. In an interview van der Sluijs gave to Friends of the Earth in the Netherlands, he was presented as someone who seems to have done everything – nuclear scientist, expert on climate change, expert on electromagnetic fields, on bees and now he has just moved from Utrecht to Bergen, Norway to become a professor in ethics and science. For someone under the age of 50, his [CV](#) is laced with an incredible number of publications, but one has to wonder how deep he has been able to delve into the subject of bee research to become the Scientific Coordinator of a major international taskforce dealing with such a complex subject. That he changes specialisation so often has to be questioned.

Just because the Risk-Monger has a PhD, does not mean that tomorrow he is going to get up and become a brain surgeon. Sorry but if the major IUCN Taskforce publications are to have a lead author, he bloody well better be the best expert in the research field. Dr van der Sluijs has now moved to Norway to specialise in “post-normal science” (worth a blog some day as I am not a precaution-hugger, but post-normal science is essentially trying to broaden the scope of uncertainty considerations to embrace non-scientific aspects within scientific assessments). I suspect that that bees and neonics is just another application of his work on uncertainty and risk and he will soon find something else to challenge him.

**Dr Dave Goulson** is the honey of the activist bee science community, giving interviews to NGOs and organic food media services wherever and whenever he can. This leads to a lot of crumbs to follow up and many questionable statements, such as how he explained to Friends of the Earth Canada that farmers don't know what they are doing when they use neonicotinoids (claiming that they don't work at all) and that [farmers need to be properly educated](#) (as a person who grew up on a farm, the Risk-Monger has expressed his views on that in a previous blog). He also recently wrote that if farmers in the UK cannot grow oilseed rape (canola) without using neonicotinoids, then they had better plant something else (note that, until the massive losses this year due to the EU neonic ban, oilseed rape had been the third largest crop in the UK and is a rich source of pollen). Goulson has no doubt expressed his love for bees in his books for the general public, but his lack of understanding of farmers' concerns and farming in general is highly compromising.

Taskforce member, **Vanessa Amaral-Rogers**, has been a campaign officer at Buglife for two years. She received her MSc in 2011 in Conservation Biology but does not seem to have any publications on research topics outside of her work on three of the IUCN reports. Buglife is a UK-based NGO that is committed to conservation of invertebrate species. One of the [missions of Buglife](#) is: “Assisting in the development of legislation and policy that will ensure the conservation of invertebrates.” It is unclear what the role of an NGO lobbyist is on the IUCN taskforce, but in any other situation, that would be considered

a conflict of interest.

## No Conflict of Interest?

Conflict of interest, as a concept, is very simple. If you are paid by an organisation that has a stated agenda or objective, and you then are working in another function where that interest or agenda may influence your decision-making, then you have a conflict of interest. Buglife has an agenda that includes shaping policy (lobbying) so their presence on the TFSP does imply a conflict of interest (if we are to assume that the scientific research would be made available to policymakers in an objective, independent manner). Don't get me wrong, I have nothing against their views (as a vegetarian, I think they should be campaigning harder to stop the trend in insect sources for human dietary protein), but any conflict of interest needs to be declared. If pesticide industry scientists were on a scientific taskforce, so many activist groups would be screaming conflict of interest and demanding their withdrawal.

But a larger question to be asked is whether the funding sources of the IUCN Taskforce on Systemic Pesticides implies a wider conflict of interest. Most of the TFSP publications, [like the concluding high impact article](#), include a statement: "The authors declare no conflict of interest", but then they end with the following acknowledgements:

*The work has been funded by the Triodos Foundation's Support Fund for Independent Research on Bee Decline and Systemic Pesticides. This support fund has been created from donations by Adessium Foundation (The Netherlands), Act Beyond Trust (Japan), Utrecht University (Netherlands), Stichting Triodos Foundation (The Netherlands), Gesellschaft fuer Schmetterlingsschutz (Germany), M.A.O.C. Gravin van Bylandt Stichting (The Netherlands), Zukunft Stiftung Landwirtschaft (Germany), Study Association Storm (Student Association Environmental Sciences Utrecht University), Deutscher Berufs- und Erwerbsimkerbund e. V. (Germany), Gemeinschaft der europäischen Buckfastimker e. V. (Germany) and citizens. The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish or preparation of the manuscript.*

The last line has a familiar ring to it. We often see it at the end of industry-funded studies, and nobody believes that these studies are not in some way conflicted. Such research studies are usually prefaced with the diminishing adjective: "industry-funded". So why do we not object when activist or agenda-driven groups fund researchers or preface such studies as: "activist financed". In a world where NGOs are splashing out more money on research to support their campaign, this double standard needs to be addressed. Truth is that in a world where research costs are beyond university budgets and governments have stepped back due to austerity measures, very little research today does not entail some sort of funding carrying an attached or implied conflict of interest. To stand steadfast and insist that one source of funding smells better than the other (because you agree with their campaign more) is just pitiful hypocrisy.

## Who is funding the TFSP?

So what are the motives or agenda of the organisations funding the research budget of the IUCN TFSP? It

is largely two-fold: promote organic food and farming and reduce the influence of industry and globalisation. Would these funding organisations continue to finance the Taskforce on Systemic Pesticides if the researchers gave neonicotinoids a clean bill of health and found that bee health issues are more related to electromagnetic fields and our use of mobile phones? That money would dry up like a stone.

The initial seed funding came from the Triodos Foundation, a Dutch registered charity tied to the Triodos banking group that has been active in supporting and financing organic food producers and farmers.

Triodos Foundation's aim is to stimulate national and international initiatives that instigate social renewal, especially in organic farming, development, the environment, sustainable energy, art and culture, education and health care.

But on their Dutch website, they get into more details on how industry lobbying needs to be countered by independent science, justifying having established a capital source for what was to become the IUCN taskforce in order to get these toxic chemicals off the market ([See in Dutch](#)).

Triodos started a fund to accept further donations, not just from individuals and clients of the bank, but other large organisations. This is known as the *Support Fund for Independent Research on Bee Decline and Systemic Pesticides* and it includes other foundations and NGOs with similar agendas. The Adessium Foundation (founded by the Dutch investment banking Van Vliet family) for example, is the main funder of the anti-industry attack group, Corporate Europe Observatory. "act beyond trust" was founded by the former executive director of Greenpeace Japan and is running an anti-neonic campaign. On their website they state that: *Given that advocacy campaigning is yet to gain recognition and momentum in the Japanese society, 'act beyond trust' focuses on advocacy campaigns and supports them by providing financial help, strategic advice, technical assistance and practical training.* The [Zukunft Stiftung Landwirtschaft](#) is a banking foundation (again) supporting organic agriculture and campaigns against Monsanto in Germany.

These groups are obviously giving money for a reason, and the scientists receiving these funds cannot pretend that this does not have an influence on their research objectives. Or perhaps these foundations found the right scientists who would agree with them (explaining why certain other bee scientists were not permitted to join the TFSP).

## Transparency and reputation

But how much money have they given to this anti-neonic taskforce? That I do not know because these organisations are not at all transparent. The last IUCN financial statement gave general numbers and did not mention the funding amounts for their taskforces. On the European Transparency Register, Triodos declared that they spend and donate **€0.00** on EU lobbying. By creating an umbrella group (the Support Fund), I suppose neither Triodos nor the taskforce have to declare their financial transfers in public under the lax Dutch NGO legislation. Seriously, shouldn't banks have learnt by now how to be transparent. I have publicly asked a member of the IUCN task force for the details of their funding and have received no reply.

Imagine a situation where industry did that? Would we be OK with that or would the complaints reach the highest levels? Once again, double standards.

I sometimes wonder what the IUCN thinks of all of this. They had previously been a respectable organisation with a high degree of due diligence and impartiality. Reading an article on this topic in [Forbes](#), the journalist, Paul Rodgers, received the following statement from the IUCN:

*The IUCN insisted last night that it had not taken a position on neonicotinoids and said that the conversation reported in the memo was based on existing scientific evidence at the time.*

Given the 2010 strategy document, the conflicts of interest with the nature of the funders, the issues around how the reports were published and some of the scientists involved, I think it is wise that the IUCN is taking a step back to protect its reputation.

I agree with Matt Ridley, who in his recent comment on what is becoming known as Bee-gate, acknowledged that an [overwhelming majority of researchers are doing good, credible science](#) and that we, as a society, benefit from their work. But because the few can do so much damage to the reputation of the many, there is a strong need to protect the public trust in credible science. The Risk-Monger would like urge the bee science community (many of whom contacted me this last week) to stand up and prevent activist scientists from taking the lead in dictating what the science on bee issues is or is not. They are not only discrediting the work of credible scientists, but also further damaging the reputation of science in the public mind. By targeting their focus on one potential part of a complex issue, and then campaigning relentlessly, they are also not helping the situation of the bees. This is the most shameful part – that activists have succeeded in banning these pesticides in the EU, leaving clueless officials in Brussels feeling confident that they have solved the bee problem.

It should not come down to some blogger living in a village outside of Brussels to point out the obvious limitations and intentions present in this IUCN taskforce. It is not enough to shout these activists down at conferences or run circles around them in journal discussions. If this group, backed by activist cash and PR machines, can achieve a perception of scientific leadership, it would not be surprising to find some of these activist scientists sitting on government working groups and writing risk assessments that find their way into policy that affects farmers, the environment and the direction of further bee research.

That, regrettably, will be the sorry subject of the third and final blog on this topic (to be published in the next week).

... To be continued.

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