

A call to rename *Ziphius cavirostris* the goose-beaked whale: promoting inclusivity and diversity in marine mammalogy by re-examining common names

On November 1, 2023, the American Ornithological Society (AOS), announced it would “change all English bird names currently named after people within its geographic jurisdiction” (AOS, 2023). The AOS President, Dr. Colleen Handel, noted that “there is power in a name, and some English bird names have associations with the past that continue to be exclusionary and harmful today” (AOS, 2023). Common names are important because they are used to identify and communicate effectively about species amongst the scientific and broader community. As noted by Dr. Handel, these names also carry a legacy that can reinforce exclusivity.

In this letter, we urge the marine mammal science community to discard the use of the English common name “Cuvier's beaked whale” for *Ziphius cavirostris*. Instead, we recommend adoption of the alternative English common name for this species, the goose-beaked whale. We make this request because of Georges Cuvier's foundational role in creating and disseminating scientific racism and his misogynistic beliefs. We also ask that marine mammal scientists address the history associated with other eponymous common names and the impact of this history on members of our community.

Georges Cuvier erroneously described *Ziphius cavirostris* as an extinct species of whale in *Recherches sur les ossements*, after the specimen was excavated and donated to him by a “peasant” in Cuvier's words (Cuvier, 1823). His name is often associated with the species, as a result. However, many modern scientists may not be familiar with Cuvier's role in creating and disseminating scientific racism and how his racist beliefs were foundational in his research practices and theories, which we will describe briefly here.

During his career, Cuvier was a vocal critic of theories of evolution (Cuvier & Latreille, 1829; Jackson & Weidman, 2006) and, in 1829, published *Le Règne Animal*, in which he ranked three “human races” and proclaimed Caucasians as the original and superior race (Jackson & Weidman, 2006). He “correlated cranial and facial measurements with perceived moral and mental capabilities,” which he claimed was “divinely created and unchangeable,” following his belief in monogenism (Cuvier & Latreille, 1829; Jackson & Weidman, 2006). Cuvier's work was foundational to scientific racism. He also had many students who promoted monogenism and elaborated eugenic theories, including Sir William Lawrence, who believed that “sexual selection has improved the beauty of advanced races and governing classes” (Darlington, 1961; Hartocollis, 2019; Jackson & Weidman, 2006).

As part of his scientific work, Georges Cuvier exploited a woman called Saartjie “Sara” Baartman, a Khoisan woman from the Eastern Cape in South Africa (Johnson & Rolls, 2023). The name Saartjie Baartman was given to her by Dutch colonizers, and her true given name is unknown. In 1810, she was taken to London to be exhibited for white Europeans using the stage name “Hottentot Venus.” She was displayed as an animal, a freak

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of nature “exhibited like a wild beast; being obliged to walk, stand, or sit as [her keeper] ordered her” due to her physical features as a Black woman (Schiebinger, 2013). She was later sold and taken to France to again be put on public display before she died in 1815 at the age of 26 (Johnson & Rolls, 2023). Before Baartman's death, Cuvier subjected her to countless examinations which she opposed, as he noted in his report “Extract of Observations Made on the Corpse of a Woman Known... under the name of Venus Hottentot.” After Baartman's death, Cuvier took over three days to dissect her corpse (Johnson & Rolls, 2023). In his report, Cuvier suggested that Baartman, as well as people who looked like her, were not to be mistaken as equals, labeling them as “almost entirely savage” and those that “infest certain parts of the Cape colony” (Johnson & Rolls, 2023). Much of the content presented in the autopsy characterized Baartman as a specimen whose humanity was not worth acknowledging or honoring (Jackson & Weidman, 2006). Cuvier considered Baartman and other people of African descent as inhuman, inferior, and unworthy of the same respect as white Europeans (Cuvier & Latreille, 1829; Jackson & Weidman, 2006). There are many other quotations from the report that are too horrific and demeaning to include in this letter, but we refer readers to the analysis of Johnson & Rolls (2023) for a full account. Cuvier preserved parts of her body, including her brain and genitalia, and they were displayed in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until the 1970s. Her remains were returned to South Africa in 2002, where they were finally buried (Daley, 2002).

Considering Cuvier's horrific history of racism and sexism, we believe that the continued use of his name perpetuates the harm that he inflicted on Sara Baartman and continues to harm Black women, people who identify as women, and the Black community in general. The Society for Marine Mammalogy Diversity and Inclusion Statement recognizes that “the field of marine mammal science is only strengthened by the participation of people representing all ages, career stages, professional status, races, national, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, genders, gender identities, sexual orientations, and physical abilities.” To act on this statement, we request that the marine mammal science community discontinue the use of Cuvier's name to refer to *Ziphius cavirostris* and, more broadly, follow the AOS and reconsider all eponymous names of marine mammal species. We encourage marine mammal scientists to read the AOS committee report and other readings listed below. Finally, we urge our colleagues around the world to engage with diverse scholars from varying backgrounds to generate common names that reflect the attributes of each species, including their distribution, morphology, and behavior. We want the field of marine mammal science to be an inclusive space for everyone, especially those who have been historically marginalized. To do so, we must work to address the history of scientific racism and do our part in acknowledging and rectifying the harm that this history carries.

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Other Suggested Readings

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