

**Comments on a recent paper on the scorpion genus *Chaerilus*, published in *Comptes Rendus Biologies* by Lourenço and Rossi (2018).**

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In a recent paper that appeared in *Comptes Rendus Biologies* ("*The cave population of Chaerilus Simon, 1877 from Palawan, Philippines, and description of a new species (Scorpiones: Chaerilidae)*", <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crv.2018.12.001>) Lourenço and Rossi egregiously abused the medium of scientific publication by using it as their vehicle to disseminate false defamatory statements, as a deliberate personal assault intended to damage my reputation. In the "Introduction" section of their paper, they made unsubstantiated claims implying that I had stolen "many" zoological specimens (scorpions) from Museo di Storia Naturale dell'Università di Firenze (MZUF), and they also claimed that I falsified data labels. They cited 6 specific specimens of the scorpion genus *Chaerilus* in my collection, and claimed that I stole these from the collections of MZUF. In fact, these are dry-mounted specimens that I cited in another publication, and they most certainly did not originate from MZUF. They were acquired independently by a Czech entomologist. At the time these were collected, entomologists typically stored all of their specimens dry (see fig. 2 in Kovařík, 2008). This refutes the charge they are museum materials, which are stored wet with alcohol as preservative. By writing that I "changed the data of the specimens", Lourenço and Rossi categorically stated in public that I committed the very serious offense of scientific fraud. They did this with no proof, and without giving me any opportunity to respond beforehand. They further implied that I inappropriately retained a number of other specimens ("additional ones to be explored"), also without proof. In making such unsubstantiated allegations, they cross a red line and go far beyond any acceptable debates in published scientific literature, whose only purpose should be sharing and discussion of scientific results. In an attempt to bolster their charges, they made other false statements about my prior arrangements with MZUF, such as: "*According to the loan register of MZUF....* " and "*..he did not explain the real situation, when he did the request to the curator ..*". The fact is that no curator ever questioned or discussed this so-called "situation" with me. One of the authors (Andrea Rossi) lists MZUF as a contact address in the paper, but he does not represent the museum (see below).

The actual facts of the case are as follows. Twenty years ago I collaborated with MZUF to identify their scorpion collection. Between 1997 and 2002, I loaned part of their scorpion collection (not the entire collection as wrongly claimed by Lourenço & Rossi in their paper) shipped in 19 parcels (three in 1997). I studied and determined the loaned materials, and I described 5 new species and 3 new genera from the unique collection (e. g. *Lanzatus somalicus* Kovařík, 2001, *Uroplectes pardii* Kovařík, 2003, and *Somalicharmus whitmanae* Kovařík, 1998). The work culminated in a catalog that I coauthored with former MZUF curator Sarah Whitman, published in 2005. Together we felt that this cooperation with MZUF was both very productive and mutually beneficial. However, Lourenço and Rossi in their paper have disputed the authority of the former curator. To resolve this, I recently contacted MZUF to ask about their official position on this matter. In their email response, dated 7th January, 2019, the senior curator of MZUF informed me that: "*I agree with you that you efficiently collaborated with the Museum studying our collection of scorpions. Concerning your remarks on the recently published paper, I can only say that: the collections of the museum are public and available to*

*all scientists (professionals or amateurs) for scientific studies; every scientist studying our material is responsible for the results and the opinions he publishes; in the specific case, dr. Rossi is not member of our staff, but just one of the many scientific collaborators that the Museum has."*

Lourenço and Rossi apparently blame me, by default, for any perceived discrepancies between MZUF scorpion specimen logs or loan registers, and whatever is visible on museum shelves. In their minds, I must have hatched some devious scheme to rob the very institution that had I worked so hard to assist and collaborate with in an honest scientific endeavour. But it is important to know that I was not the only scientific collaborator in that time period who studied the scorpion collections of MZUF. Most of their specimens were also loaned out to Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris, which coincidentally is currently the institution of Dr Lourenço. In the Paris loans that were returned to MZUF, it was troubling to find that while some of the original labels were retained, others were missing and replaced by new labels, an irresponsible practice that can lead to serious problems in keeping track of the identities of specimens (see for example Kovařík et Whitman, 2005: 112). Many troubles in taxonomic science have been linked to mislabeling of specimens (e. g. Ojanguren-Affilastro, Volschenk & Mattoni, 2018). During our work on MZUF materials, we also found over 100 specimens including types covered by an old, long overdue loan from another Italian museum, and Sarah Whitman arranged their return (see Kovařík, 2003: 159, Addendum).

Readers may react with disbelief when they witness two authors, one with an important sounding title and lengthy publication list, maliciously slandering and smearing another scientific colleague in print by making false accusations. Why did I become a target? I believe it is because, in my research I merely sought the truth, to illuminate the systematics of a group of animals that interests me. Advancement in science depends on hypothesis testing and critical evaluation of all reported findings. To make progress, it is of course necessary to continually correct errors. In my investigations, I encountered a number of errors in scorpion taxonomy and published corrections. Sometimes I, or other investigators, corrected errors in papers by Lourenço or Rossi, or engaged in vigorous academic debate which is healthy for science. Over the years, the errors accumulated and became rather common (see e. g. Ochoa et al. (2013), Kovařík, Teruel & Lowe (2017), Kovařík (2018), Ojanguren-Affilastro, Volschenk & Mattoni (2018), to cite just a few of many). Unfortunately, instead of keeping to scientific issues, or accepting error corrections and moving on, Lourenço and Rossi now seek to destroy my reputation with lies. Such a toxic abuse of academic authority, to silence anybody trying to correct scientific errors, poisons the very foundations of the scientific method.

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