

International Collaboration for the Collection of Biological Materials: Thoughts from a Mexican Perspective

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During the Workshop on Federal and International Scientific Permits, held at the San Diego Natural History Museum, 29–31 January 1997, many participants expressed concerns about the procedures for obtaining permits to collect biological materials in Mexico. Among other issues discussed were the confusion of the process and the high (non-refundable) fee required when submitting an application. Some participants pointed out that through involvement in collaborative projects with Mexican participants as principal investigators, acquiring the proper permits became much simpler, as it was incumbent upon the latter to obtain the permits. This commentary is a post-symposium contribution in which I present my thoughts on such collaborative arrangements. I have been involved in collaborative projects, have rejected some offers for collaboration, and am aware of collaborative arrangements between foreign scientists and other Mexican scientists in which the collecting permits were issued to the Mexican participant. The thoughts I present are strictly my own and they do not represent any official posture nor are they necessarily shared by my colleagues (either Mexican or foreign).

TYPES OF COLLABORATIVE PERMITS

International collaborative projects in which the collecting permit is held by a Mexican scientist fall within six categories or combinations thereof. The titles I have chosen for these categories are not precise but represent my perception of them, as explained by the accompanying definitions:

(1) Altruistic: "I know that your research is good, or needed, or fundamental, for Mexico. Therefore I will include you as my collaborator on my collecting permit. I will not be a co-author of any of the publications that derive from such a collection, as I do not participate. I am paid by knowing that the information is being produced."

(2) Prostituted: "I put you on my permit, you put me as a co-author on your papers."

(3) Need for knowledge (or curiosity): "I put you on my permit, because I need the knowledge that you will produce."

(4) Material exchange: "I put you on my permit, and you provide me with materials and equipment that are much needed in my lab."

(5) Educational: "I put you on my permit, and I will participate (or my technician/students will) in the field/lab work with you, because I want to learn the techniques (or have my technician/students learn them)."

(6) Peer-collaboration: "I put you on my permit, you provide a prearranged share of the logistics, and we will jointly engage in trying to find the truth in some biological

problem. We will collect, prepare, analyze, write, and publish the results together."

Two types of potential collaboration that I have not known to occur are

(7) Compensatory funding: "I put you on my permit, and you provide me with funding for my own research project."

(8) Commercial: "I put you on my permit, in exchange for a fee (euphemistically, salary compensation)."

Type 1 agreements do happen, and I don't find anything to comment on them. Type 6 represents real scientific partnership and should be the rule, but I can see the point in cases 3, 4, and 5 as well. These three might help fulfill very important necessities of some research groups that cannot be satisfied easily other ways. Collaborative programs very often are made up of combinations of types 3, 4, 5, and/or 6. By themselves, type 3, 4, and 5 collaborations should not involve co-authorship on any papers derived from the research associated with them. Type 7 collaboration would be equivalent to type 4.

I find type 2 collaboration totally unacceptable. This type can be a practical working arrangement for both parties but is totally dishonest. Because of its reflection of the ethical integrity of the participants, I would be hesitant even to trust the results and conclusions of anyone engaged in such an arrangement. Type 8 collaboration would be similarly unacceptable.

OUTCOME OF A COLLABORATIVE ARRANGEMENT

Although many, even most, international collaborative efforts have an outcome satisfactory to all parties involved, sometimes one or more participants feel abused. The best way to avoid negative outcomes is the establishment of clear rules during the planning of the project and sticking to them. These rules should include responsibilities (administrative, technical, financial), use of the data, criteria for authorship in published works, etc.

DEPOSITION OF SPECIMENS

I feel that if the specimens are collected under a permit granted to a Mexican scientist, the specimens should be deposited in a Mexican collection. If a foreign institution, very likely the one with which the foreign scientist is affiliated, is interested in obtaining some of the specimens, proper arrangements should be made between the curators of both collections. It is only fair that if Mexico enriches some other country's museums with specimens, it should also enrich its own collections with specimens from abroad.

When making arrangements to exchange specimens, special care should be taken to assure that type specimens remain in Mexico, available to Mexican scientists. However, use of syntypes would allow for multiple repositories, perhaps even foreign ones.

ARE YOU LOOKING FOR A MEXICAN COLLABORATOR?: A RECOMMENDATION

Many of us have received proposals from people wanting us to collaborate on subjects of their interest, sometimes very insistently. Foreign colleagues trying to collaborate should remember that we, too, are scientists, and that we have our own research interests and agendas. Also, our perception of priorities may be very different from those of a foreign colleague, especially if he/she comes from a country that is socially, economically, or culturally very different. Rather than trying to impose upon us their priorities, foreign researchers should explore the Mexican scien-

tific arena for colleagues working on the same subject, then try to establish common interests and work out a collaborative agenda. I do value the opinion of foreign colleagues, but also oppose any form of academic imperialism.

One warning note is in order. Even with the best intentions of the foreign scientist, the relation can be somehow forced. Many Mexican scientists are not good at saying "no," even though they would like to. Foreign colleagues should proceed carefully and sensitively to be sure that if a Mexican counterpart agrees to collaborate, he/she really means it. This enhances the chance of a mutually satisfactory and long-lasting relationship.

I am convinced that some reflection on the issues I have pointed out will be of value to international scientists in acquiring successful working relationships with interested colleagues in Mexico or in other countries.

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