

Editorial. Ethical trends for insect collecting. Less is more

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Abstract. In this editorial, the authors raise ethical questions. Do we really need to collect, collect and collect? Even if it is not forbidden to collect, do we really need so many pinned specimens and so huge collections of insects? Our northern neighbours, the members of the Dutch Entomological Society, during their general Assembly of members on 17 April 2025, discussed the ethical issues about collecting, even with permits, very broadly, candidly and openly. Times have changed, so we, entomologists, are adapting to changes. We advise following the legal way to keep and provide evidence of legal collecting activity.

Samenvatting. In dit editoriaal werpen de auteurs ethische vragen op. Moeten we echt verzamelen, verzamelen en nog eens verzamelen? Zelfs als het niet verboden is om te verzamelen, hebben we dan echt zoveel gepinde exemplaren en zulke enorme verzamelingen insecten nodig? Onze noorderburen, de leden van de Nederlandse Entomologische Vereniging, bespraken tijdens hun algemene ledenvergadering op 17 april 2025 de ethische kwesties over verzamelen, zelfs met vergunningen, heel breed, openhartig en openlijk. Tijden zijn veranderd, dus wij, entomologen, passen ons aan aan veranderingen. We adviseren om altijd strikt de wet toe te passen bij verzamelactiviteiten.

Résumé. Dans cet éditorial, les auteurs soulèvent des questions éthiques. Avons-nous vraiment besoin de collecter, collecter et collecter ? Même s'il n'est pas interdit de collecter, avons-nous vraiment besoin de tant de spécimens épinglés et de tant de collections d'insectes ? Nos voisins du nord, les membres de la société néerlandaise d'entomologie, ont discuté très largement, franchement et ouvertement, lors de leur assemblée générale du 17 avril 2025, des questions éthiques liées à la collecte, même avec des permis. Les temps ont changé, et nous, entomologistes, nous nous adaptons aux changements. Nous conseillons de suivre la voie légale pour conserver et fournir des preuves d'une activité de collecte légale.

Key words: Editorial — Ethics for insect collecting — Museum collections.

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Collecting and collections

These lines were written when a big scandal on Belgian television broke out. Two Belgian teenagers collected thousands of ant queens in Kenya and, consequently, they were caught by the Biosecurity officers (Fig. 1). Both teenagers were put in jail in Kenya. Probably, we entomologists failed as a society and community to educate young people on what cannot be done. Such cases bring enormous reputation damage to entomology and honest academic entomologists (VRT News). Collecting without permits is biopiracy, and as with any piracy, it should be taken very seriously with zero tolerance. We can only presume what kind of commercial entomologists (they are certainly not members of FES) could buy such queen ants, even if they could serve in one or another way for dark taxa projects. This unusual case underscores what Kenyan officials say is a trend in wildlife smuggling: there is money to be made in smuggling smaller, lesser-known species, too. "This case highlights a growing global threat: the biopiracy of native species", the Kenya Wildlife Service said on the X platform and in *Daily*

News on 16 April. The unauthorised collection of the ants "not only undermines Kenya's sovereign rights over its biodiversity but also deprives local communities and research institutions of potential ecological and economic benefits." In general, an ethical attitude towards nature comes forward now as a general policy of our modern times: do we really need to collect, collect and collect? Even if it is not forbidden to collect, do we really need so many pinned specimens and so huge collections of insects? Those who curated huge institutional collections, including the authors of these lines, know very well that museum collection depots are full of loads of boxes of collected specimens that often are not opened for centuries. In most cases, they represent more of the same, and in some cases, the collected insects are even in a poor state or not labelled properly (De Prins 2022, 2023).



Fig. 1. Tubes with illegally collected ants in Kenya.

While presenting his latest book “The genus *Carabus* in Belgium”, our member Ief Peeters introduced already some years ago “The Insect Collector’s Code (Peeters 2022: 235). We very cordially invite our members to read this Code. The general motivating question of this editorial is as follows: Would it not be better to leave insects in nature where they actually belong? This is a small step to stop the decline of insect communities and leave nature to regulate the enormous complexity of food chains that include insects.

Our northern neighbours, the members of the Dutch Entomological Society, during their general Assembly of members on 17 April 2025, discussed the ethical issues about collecting, even with permits, very broadly, candidly and openly. Please read their ethical suggestions on the NEV website <https://nev.nl/ANBI/> (NEV 2025). Times have changed, so we, entomologists, are adapting to changes. We embraced the digital revolution and exchanged collecting nets for sophisticated cameras and smartphones. We helped to create and are devoted users of identification apps based on AI, like Obsidentify (2025). So, now it is time to adopt a new policy of collecting, creating collections and realising that Museums are full. They have no obligation anymore to adopt insect collections, even if they were collected with permits and good intentions.

What museum collections can and what cannot take?

Our northern neighbours, already in 2024, switched to the new mentality that can be summarised as follows (de Vos 2025)

- Collect concerning nature, thinking about nature and not everything.
- Concentrate on a certain group; a specialised collection is more valid than a general collection.
- Keep it small; a small reference collection containing only several representative specimens per species, especially cryptic and difficult to identify species, is enough.

- Do the necessary paperwork for obtaining the collection permits and other documents.
- Enquire before you are going to donate your collection, negotiate with the museum about what they are interested in.

This does not mean that museums will not accept the collections. The collections as research infrastructure serve for multi-purpose advances for biodiversity and other life sciences, and curators are happy to receive the material that is present in the houses of our passionate and devoted members of entomological societies. However, we need to be realistic about which material will bring additional value to the existing collection, since curation, implementation and digitisation of the collection takes a lot of time, resources and human specialised knowledge. Museum staff are requested to make a selection, to prioritise what museums need, what they can and what they cannot take. So, we should be prepared that not every donation will be accepted; it might be only part of it that is accepted, and the rest might not. It is not only *Naturalis*, but many museums in Europe and the world are following a similar ethical trend (Ethische Code voor Museums 2025). Museums have no borders; they have a network (ICOM)! Museums cannot take huge collections anymore, not only due to space limitations but also on ethical grounds. Insects belong to nature, and we should respect nature with all its amazing diversity, including insects.

Summarising this editorial, **we advise following the legal way to keep and provide evidence of legal collecting activity**. Please keep the contact addresses of the authorities who provided the collection permits. The most important issue is that we should **ask ourselves**, do we really need to collect in our countries and abroad *en masse*, would it not be better for nature and future generations of entomologists if some species and specimens stayed in nature where they belong? It will benefit nature, the complexity of food chains, but also will provide an enormous discovery joy for future entomologists who are born in our changing times or will be born in the future.

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