

The Gender Bender Experience of *Lepomis*

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by

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The year was 1988. Sunfishes of the genus *Lepomis* were swimming about, pursuing their daily routine, oblivious and unaware that a controversy had been loosed among the titans of taxonomy about the gender of their name *Lepomis*.

In 1819, Rafinesque proposed the generic name and used it as masculine as in the name *Lepomis machrochirus* (bluegill). Come now Bailey and Robins in 1988, muddying the water by contending that *Lepomis* is derived from the feminine Greek nouns *lepis* (scale) and *omis* (a fish).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, *Lepomis* is feminine and species names should agree with that gender. The name for the bluegill should be *Lepomis machrochira*. Likewise, the *-us* ending for eight other *Lepomis* species should be changed to *-a*. Rafinesque himself contributed to the confusion by treating *Lepomis* as a feminine in 1820. Perhaps he was rattled by John James Audobon's pranks. Audobon would paint imaginary fish that he claimed to have seen and submit the pictures to Rafinesque for classifying and naming.

But *Lepomis* had been treated as masculine for so long, and such a large body of literature had accumulated, that ichthyologists were loathe to change. A petition was sent to the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature to rule that *Lepomis* is masculine for the reasons of Rafinesque's original intent, long usage, stability, and dubiety of the etymology and construction of *Lepomis*.<sup>2</sup> Comments were submitted.<sup>3</sup> Bailey continued to support the

feminine assignment, but Robins and six others supported the proposal to fix *Lepomis* as masculine. The Commission voted in 1992, 24 for fixation of *Lepomis* as masculine, three against, and two not voting.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the customary scientific names of the nine *Lepomis* species ending in *-us* are stabilized for the nonce.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Bailey, R.M. and C.R. Robins. 1988. Changes in North American fish names, especially as related to the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature, 1985. *Bull. Zool. Nomen.* 45 (2): 92-103.
- <sup>2</sup> Etnier, D.A. and M.L. Warren, Jr. 1990. *Lepomis* Rafinesque, 1819: proposed fixation of masculine gender for the name. *ibid.* 47 (4): 280-282.
- <sup>3</sup> Bailey, R.M. and C.R. Robins. 1991. Comments on the proposed fixation of masculine gender for the generic name *Lepomis*. *ibid.* 48 (3): 253-254.
- <sup>4</sup> Opinion 1648. 1992. *Lepomis* Rafinesque, 1819: gender fixed as masculine. *ibid.* 49 (2): 169-170.