

**Imagine a website where** you could find up-to-date, accurate information about every known species on Earth. A new initiative called the Encyclopaedia of Life (EOL), aims to create just that. Launched in Washington DC in May 2007, the EOL will generate a million web pages over the next five years, help digitise a large portion of scientific literature, generate educational materials for schools and universities, and contribute to new scientific analysis.

The idea behind this ambitious project is deceptively simple – construct a website accessible through a single web portal for each of the 1.8 million known living species on Earth. Like a good field guide, each entry will give authoritative and scientifically verified information, covering geographic range, habitat, natural history and conservation status. It will also offer interactive illustrations showing, for example, how a species fits into the evolutionary tree as well as detailed maps and pictures and, in many cases, sound and video clips. Each sites opening pages will be designed for the general public, but they will also provide links to specialised, scientific literature for molecular biologists, geneticists, teachers, horticulturists, conservationists and other specialists.

On a planet of shrinking resources, this information will help people make wiser decisions about preserving our natural world. The EOL will give users access to the information held on most known species, which is currently held in the world's great museums and universities. This will give scientists and citizens in the developing world access to information about the flora and fauna of their own regions, in many cases, for the first time. EOL will transform the way ecosystems and species are understood and managed in developing countries.

**In a 2003 article, Encyclopaedia of Life,** the well-known entomologist EO Wilson envisioned 'an electronic page for each species of organism on Earth – a summary of everything known'. Two forward-looking US institutions, the Alfred P Sloan Foundation and the John D and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation, have generously given \$12.5 million for the first two years of the five-year EOL project and pledged a similar amount when it meets expectations. The EOLs Secretariat will be based at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) in Washington. But the EOL is a global enterprise, involving scores of institutions and thousands of scientists.

Partners are being sought across the world with the Australian government and Chinese Academy of Sciences have recently committed to supporting EOL.

The Museum will be involved in all parts of the project. In particular, the Biodiversity Heritage Library (BHL) component, chaired by me. The BHL is a consortium of natural history libraries – in the UK, USA, Europe, Australia and China – which will scan and digitise a vast amount of printed literature and information to support the EOL.

This is a massive project – probably lasting 10 years and costing more than \$70 million – but it has the potential to change dramatically our shared knowledge of the biological world. That knowledge will enable us to make better decisions, and preserve this complex and exciting planet.

**[www.biodiversitylibrary.org](http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org)**  
**[www.eol.org](http://www.eol.org)**

# A website for every species on Earth

By Graham Higley, Head of Library & Information Services

‘On a planet of shrinking resources, this information will help people make wiser decisions about preserving our natural world.’

