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And the winner of Wikipedia's influence list is ... an 18th century botanist. Hear hear

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Carl Linnaeus is hardly a household name, but the Swedish doctor who created a global naming system for species deserves this accolade

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Bigger than Jesus has been the headline, and the news that Carl Linnaeus has been judged the most influential person on Wikipedia could be seen as the final triumph of the Enlightenment: religion routed by a Swedish scientist who established how we name the species that make up the wondrous range of life on our planet.

This view may be a little optimistic. When scientists, led by Eom Young-Ho at the University of Toulouse, deployed an alternative algorithm they came up with Adolf Hitler, Michael Jackson and Madonna as the most important across all languages, which sounds more true to the spirit of our times.

And Linnaeus, an adventurous 18th century botanist and doctor who created a wonderfully clear way to name animals and plants, would hardly be flattered to top a contentious online chart, because by the end of his long, scientific life he was a European superstar, hailed by Goethe and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (the latter saying, "tell him I know no greater man on earth") and corresponding with the likes of Catherine II of Russia. Nevertheless, this is a welcome moment in the spotlight for the Swede, and a chance for those of us beyond appreciative academia to celebrate his life and legacy.

I happened to be in Sweden last week, interviewing Fredrik Sjöberg, a writer and biologist, who memorably wrote of Linnaeus: "He managed to sell an operating system, a bit like Bill Gates." This sounds dismissive, and Sjöberg ranks his countryman below Darwin in the scientific pantheon, because unlike Charles, Carl did not formulate an eternal truth. However, Sjöberg still believes Linnaeus will be "a megastar forever".

Simple innovations are often the most difficult things to conceive, and before Linnaeus, most species were lumbered with a messy string of names describing its attributes. Today, our common names for plants and animals vary as much as the species themselves. For instance, in the English language alone, cow parsley, that common spring plant with pretty cream flowers, is known as Queen Anne's lace, wild chervil, wild

beaked parsley, keck, mother-die, poor man's oatmeal and dog's flourish.

Linnaeus's great invention was the system of binomial nomenclature: he decided that all species should be named in two halves. While many of his broader taxonomic classifications have been superseded, such as his belief that everything could be called an animal or plant, his naming system has endured. Every species still has a generic name referring to the genus (a closely related group of different species) and a second specific name that identifies a unique species. Both names are in Latin (although the Latin is often derived from Greek or other languages) and so cow parsley is known throughout the world as Anthriscus sylvestris.

This global language is crucial not just for scientists, but also for any nature lover who ever travels beyond their homeland. When I chatted to Sjöberg about butterflies, neither of us could understand our native common names but their scientific names made everything clear. I lack a classical education and many marvels contained inside these scientific names are lost on me, but they are often fantastically apt. The purple emperor butterfly is Apatura iris – first classified by Linnaeus in 1758 – and Iris was Greek demi-goddess and winged messenger who appeared in the guise of a rainbow, a splendid description of the butterfly.

Cynics might argue it is inevitable that today's online cataloguers would hail a cataloguer of yesteryear. It's rather like a group of librarians deciding that the most influential person in the world is a librarian.

But Linnaeus deserves his ancient and modern acclaim. It is impossible not to be in awe of the Swede's ceaseless curiosity and the breadth of his achievements and ideas. He had some entertainingly frank views on sexual matters and was such an expert in the reproduction of plants that he became the first man to get a banana tree to fruit in Holland. One typically innovative theory was that the fruit Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge was a banana. If you need to quickly cover your nakedness, a banana leaf is preferable to a fig leaf.

Linnaeus's globalisation of taxonomy came well before the economic globalisation which is now threatening so many of the species he helped to identify. Naming things might not save them, but it is the first step to treasuring what we have and, as the biologist and writer Colin Tudge has argued, maintaining "the general shape of the genealogical tree that holds all creatures together". As Tudge wrote: "We are not the fairy at the top of that tree, as old textbooks showed. Like all the rest, we're just a twig."

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