In his commentary on the state of systematics today, Crisci (2006) adds his perspectives to a series of such commentaries published in the pages of Systematic Botany (e.g., Kruckeberg 1997; Lammers 1999; Landrum 2001). He associates the rise of molecular biology with the decline in conventional plant taxonomy and makes a number of assertions about cause and effect in systematics in particular and biology in general, which create a rather bleak view of the state of systematics. The author identifies a series of risks—perils—that confront the field of systematics today. In noting that these are correlated in time with the dramatic increase in emphasis on molecular biology, he draws a connection between the two and suggests that a tendency to support molecular biology at the institutional level has created a self-reinforcing tendency towards molecular systematics and has had a negative effect on progress in other, more traditional, areas of systematics.

His view is one that is widely held by systematists today and, in general, I'm sympathetic to just about everything he has to say, although I think he has missed the mark in a few places and is in error if he thinks the effects he describes are unique to systematics. I'll offer some commentary and a critique of some of his interpretations. I will end with a re-write of his “perils” in the form of “descriptors” of what I think is the state of systematics today. I think I have a more hopeful view of our field, although I share his concern that the decline of taxonomic expertise is a serious problem at a time when loss of biodiversity is widely recognized as a global problem.

RESPONSE TO CRISCI’S “PERILS”

The author characterizes the current age of systematics as the “molecular age.” I think this might better be said to be the “phylogenetic age,” because this is really where the emphasis lies in systematics today. In fact, systematics has transformed Biology through its contribution of a phylogenetic perspective. Seen in this light, molecular methods for gathering data justifiably have risen to prominence. However, we also have seen tremendous advances in concepts and methods, as well as sources of data. The value to all of biology of understanding phylogeny is certainly widely recognized now and concerted efforts (along with funding) to hur-