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**Conrad Gessner's Fish Books (1556-1560):
processing information in a rapidly expanding
field of knowledge**

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PROPOSITIONS

1. In the *Historia piscium*, Gessner omitted the extensive overviews of ancient scholarly literature found in other parts of his *Historia animalium*, and focused more on contemporary descriptions and identifications of aquatic animals, placing himself in the midst of contemporary scientific debates and weighing different opinions and arguments.
2. Gessner devised an organisation of aquatic species based on similarities which enabled him to keep an overview of the mass of new information which he included in the *Historia piscium*, and to cross-reference rather than repeat information, in turn saving time, ink, and paper.
3. Gessner included accounts and depictions of monstrous creatures from folklore, mythology and literature, emphasising the relevance of these sources to his description of nature by including overviews of this literary material, but he was sceptical about the existence of these creatures and showed no interest in speculating about their origin or creation.
4. Alterations which Gessner had made to depictions of aquatic species obtained from an array of sources reveal that his focus was not directed at merely 'illustrating' texts to make them attractive to readers nor at depicting nature as it could be observed in real life, but that taxonomy was a primary focus of Gessner's illustrations.
5. While classifications of species devised by naturalists reflect their growing insights into nature and their desire to understand it, these are first and foremost a means to combat information overload so that an overview can be achieved.
6. The rapidly intensifying interest in the study of living nature taking place in the sixteenth century manifested itself first in botany, but after that spread first to ichthyology, before the study of mammals and birds.
7. In sixteenth-century fish studies, the circumstance that there was little to no prior scholarly knowledge about aquatic animals to draw upon resulted in a new focus on directly observable information, primarily morphology, instead of literature.
8. Scholarly and other works on aquatic species written in the sixteenth century contain a wealth of climatological and ecological information, and it is crucial that further research should be focussed on this.
9. Information organisation lies at the base of every successful endeavour, no insight is gained and no progress is made until transparency and overview are obtained through the sorting of information.
10. While we all know a whale is mammal, on a more basic level we all identify it as a fish. This highlights both a fundamental human inclination to categorise based on visual information and the arbitrariness of the category boundaries of classification which we perceive.
11. Uncovering a pattern in or simply sorting into an organisation a previously tangled mass of information can be an almost sensory pleasure.