

Into the Looking Glass

WHAT a high! The inaugural meeting of the Australasian section of the Society for Conservation Biology was a resounding success, with 369 attendees, 5 symposia, 146 contributed oral papers and 15 poster presentations. The media were attentive, with widespread reporting, at least within the Australian outlets. As noted by an excited Karen Firestone in her post-conference summing up: "... such a large attendance indicates the strong need and desire for conservation meetings of this sort in the region . . .". Conservation science is clearly alive and well in Australasia.

But we knew that. More important is the evidence that people are hungry for knowledge and are prepared to invest time and money into obtaining it.

The conference is a great opportunity for focused discussion and networking. But an important ongoing outlet for regional conservation is this journal, actually now your journal. *PCB* has been formally adopted by the society as an official mouthpiece. It is time therefore to consider its future options.

The traditional role of science journals is to service science. But their role and impact is evolving because the internet has completely changed the way in which people from all walks of life access information. Also, most of us are now too busy to bask in the simple pleasure of intellectual discovery, which is what reading a journal should be all about. Journals must therefore evolve with the times and their audience.

Younger readers may be surprised to learn that *Pacific Conservation Biology* was not created by scientists. It began as the dream of a publisher with a strong environmental ethic. Ivor Beatty heard the sound of Silent Spring¹ and determined that he could use his successful publishing house to service conservation by publishing quality science. The journal was born in 1993 and after a lurching start has evolved into a valuable regional resource of considerable breadth and influence. The recently constituted Australasian branch of the Conservation Society provided a resting place for a vehicle that was running well, but needed a home. The branch got lucky, because establishing a journal is a time-consuming and expensive journey that a relatively small scientific society would be unlikely to embark on these days.

But there is a dark side.

First, the journal routinely struggles commercially and so has always been subsidized by Surrey Beatty. It is worth noting that for about the same total investment, those 369 people who attended the conference (at an individual cost of around \$1,000 for registration, travel and accommodation) could have purchased a subscription to the journal every year since its inception. Had they made that alternative choice, the journal would be struggle-free. Presumably the excitement of attending a conference creates a much greater adrenaline rush than does the joy of receiving a journal in the mail!

Fair enough. But that raises a second point. Long gone are the days when the weekly trip to the "new journals" shelves in the library was a high point of the weeks' activities. I hazard a guess that many younger readers have no idea what I am talking about — e.g., a colleague recently discovered himself describing the location of the library to a third year student in the context of a conversation about why it might be interesting to go there. This colleague is old school. He actually still makes the weekly voyage of discovery to the new journal shelves. He is also an endangered species.

There was once a time when several hours of my week were allocated to "library" and I would wander the new journal shelves grazing on the latest offerings in philosophy, psychology, ethics, economics and even biology. Of course, I had my favourites and also some that I checked for strictly professional reasons. The key point is that I would frequently become totally engrossed in a topical article written about an intellectual universe into which I rarely, if ever, foray these days.

Why not? There are multiple explanations mostly linked to time costs, but the following spring immediately to mind. When I need literature today, I simply google the topic and scan whatever comes up. My intellectual development is no longer driven by curiosity, but by expediency. I do not even pretend to keep up with the mind-blowing array of information in journals any more and those earlier foraging expeditions to the new journals shelves are a distant memory. The principle is that if and when I need to read about something, I can find it without leaving my desk. The worst consequence of all: if it is not on the net, then it does not exist.

And there is the rub: *PCB* is not on the net.

¹Carson, R., 1962. Silent Spring. Houghton Mifflin.

An editor has multiple responsibilities, of which ensuring scientific quality is just one. Equally important is ensuring that the journal is accessible, is read, is cited and is seen as a desirable outlet by potential authors. Currently, the journal is failing on several of those aspects. The introduction of regular quality assurance evaluations for individual academics (New Zealand: 2003, 2007 and projected for 2012; Australia: first round 2008) is making things worse. Such evaluations effectively assign points to an academic using the status of each journal in which he/she publishes, using measures such as citation indices. While imperfect, such indices are the best available measure of impact.

Due to the citation status of *PCB*, several of my New Zealand colleagues have confided that they consider it a low priority journal for submission of their work. One Australian colleague has already advised that he will discourage his students from submitting to *PCB* in the interests of their future quality assurance ratings.

The problem is not specific to *PCB* — it is a general problem for all second-tier journals (which tend to be those with a regional or taxonomic focus). But *PCB* is the one we care about.

To start with, we must get *PCB* onto the net. Unfortunately, doing so raises the spectre of even fewer paid subscriptions to a journal that already struggles. Personally, I like having the

paper product in hand so that I can browse on the bus. But the reality is that producing and distributing that paper product is the main cost of journal production (all other aspects of production, apart from the copy editing supplied by Surrey Beatty, are serviced by volunteers).

The society met with Ivor Beatty during the conference in Sydney and discussed these issues in some detail. It was subsequently recommended that the journal becomes electronic. Many consequences of this recommendation have not been fully explored. For example, the type and extent of access needs further discussion (some society journals restrict access to members for one year in order to retain a subscription base). Would we continue to produce the journal as four issues per year? How do we ensure that acceptance standards are maintained? And so on. Surrey Beatty is in a dilemma about the recommendation because, like me, they prefer the paper product. However, they accept that something must be done about net access.

The bottom line: open access to information is central to the scientific enterprise. The journal will be available to many more people through the net than will ever see it in a library, or through personal subscription.

This is your journal. Your comments and thoughts are welcome.

Ian G. McLean