

## Communication and the Publication Process

BY the time you read this editorial, *Pacific Conservation Biology* may be fully online (<http://www.informit.com.au/> — see access instructions at the end of this article, or check for a link on the journal web site at <http://pcb.murdoch.edu.au/>). With support from the Oceania Section of the Society for Conservation Biology (<http://www.conbio.org/Sections/Oceania>), all back issues of *Pacific Conservation Biology*, not already in pdf format, have been scanned and made electronically friendly. Researchers, students and anyone interested in conservation biology in the Pacific Region will now be able to access *Pacific Conservation Biology* archives through subscribing libraries, by purchasing a specific article on-line or consulting an article for a pay per view fee. For most of us, online access to journals has made the literature easier and faster to use than at any time in the past. It will be a while yet before visits to a library or opening a book are no longer essential to good research, but the day is coming.

Whether online access will lead to greater use of archival material and higher citation indices for journals remains to be seen. We still find in many of the papers submitted for publication in *Pacific Conservation Biology* the tendency to ignore, or at least not cite the older literature, with ideas and knowledge often attributed erroneously to more recent publications. By all means cite a review where the historical literature is comprehensively acknowledged, but failure to cite a review or the older publications directly is lazy literature research.

It will also be interesting to see to what extent online access to journals and archival material breaks down the tendency for authors to rely on local and national publications. It is well-known that authors tend to cite the journals to which they have the easiest access, are familiar with, and/or are published in the author's preferred language. Online access may make it easier, for example, for an Australian or an American to obtain papers published in Mandarin, German or Russian, but reading them is another matter. Nevertheless, with the internet there should no longer be any excuse for an American or Australian to preferentially cite English language papers published in one's home country, as is presently the situation.

In an ideal world, Googling the internet should lead to better communication among researchers, irrespective of their respective locations or nationalities, and thereby to better

research. It would help, we think, if the institutions and people responsible for training the next generation of scientists took the time to instruct their students in the merits of inter- and intra-disciplinary communication. It would also be useful if young scientists were instructed in the art (and pitfalls) of publication. This would, of course, include instruction in the importance of a broad understanding of the literature and familiarity with historical material. However, it is fairly clear to anyone involved with the publication of a scientific journal that too many aspiring authors have little idea of how to go about having their work published. Preparing and submitting a paper for publication requires considerable skill and effort; it is a learned trait, not a genetic inheritance and needs to be taught. Publication is a task new authors would find much easier, more rewarding, and less frustrating if they were fully informed about the process.

Having good ideas, designing experiments, and collecting, collating and analysing data are only the first steps of the research process. Research is not complete until it is published and it is here that some simple advice on the publication process, if followed, can make life, including that of referees and journal editors, as well as authors, so much easier.

First of all, select the journal in which you would like to see your work published. Choose an appropriate journal, one which reaches the people most likely to be interested in and to use your research and ideas, either in their own research or in applied activities, such as conservation and management. Do not be unduly influenced by the modern emphasis on citation indices and publishing **only** in international journals with high impact factors, which ignores the empirical evidence from many disciplines that it is not possible to predict the quality of an individual paper on the basis of the journal in which it appears. Publication should not be about scoring brownie points, but about effective communication; communication that leads to change. While authors should never underestimate the worth of their work, considerable time and emotion can be saved by selecting the appropriate journal, even if it is not published overseas or in a journal with a high impact factor.

Journal impact factors can be very misleading and are influenced by much more than the quality of the papers they publish. A bright idea

and good research are just as likely to be highly cited when published in a journal with a lower impact factor provided it is the appropriate journal and reaches the most appropriate audience, people who are most likely to use and value your work. While it is laudable to aim “high”, sending a paper, regardless of its merits, to an inappropriate journal too often leads to rejection, including the paper being returned without even being refereed. So, Step one, choose your journal carefully.

Step two, write your paper to fit that journal’s style and format. Read the journal’s guidelines to authors and read some recent papers published in that journal noting expression and journal style. Author’s guides are just that and do not necessarily present all the details on journal style and format that authors should adhere to. It can also help if you make sure you have read and cited any relevant papers published in the journal you are submitting your paper to. Some journals strongly encourage authors to do this, but any papers cited must be relevant and not cited simply because an editor is attempting to boost the journal’s citation profile. Also, do not neglect the need to review, and cite as necessary, the historical literature. Appropriate attribution is plain “good manners”, as much as it is part of thorough research.

Step three, proofread your finished manuscript carefully, checking for spelling, syntax, punctuation and grammar, as well as journal format and style. Do not trust your computer’s spellcheck — it will pass genetically modified food as easily as genetically modified food! This means, if you have previously prepared your paper for another journal, revising it to fit the requirements of the new journal to which you are submitting. You should not, of course, submit to a new journal without hearing back from the first — this potentially makes more work for everyone and will not endear you to editors.

Step four, before submitting your paper have it read critically by colleagues. Choose people to read it who will give you an honest appraisal of its merits and listen to their advice. Choose people who have published widely. If you are publishing in a language that is not your parent language, be sure to have the paper checked by people fluent in writing in that language. We include here English speaking and writing authors who have not had the benefit of a sound education in the mechanics (spelling, grammar, punctuation) of English. An extensive free guide can be found at <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/>.

Be aware that an editor will usually make a decision as to whether to reject a manuscript or

send it out for review on the first reading, so it is critical to make sure any manuscript is good science, well-argued, well-referenced, well-presented (e.g., brief and to the point) and within the scope of the journal. Double-check that all references cited in the text are in the reference list and *vice versa*. Make sure references are set out following the journal’s format precisely.

After submission and editorial approval, all papers at *Pacific Conservation Biology* are normally refereed by at least two reviewers, often by three. If they disagree about the merits of a paper, the editor may seek additional reviews. Keep in mind that authors are free to recommend reviewers for their submission; however, editors are not obliged to engage them. If there are people that are not suitable as reviewers because of conflicts of interest or for some other valid reason, it is appropriate to ask they are not engaged as reviewers.

Step five, if your paper has been refereed and rejected by another journal, follow the advice of the referees and revise the paper to the best of your abilities. When sending the revised paper to another journal, advise the editor that the paper has already been refereed. Include the referee’s reports and any editorial comments from the original journal. Tell the new editor how you have changed the paper as a consequence of the advice received. Refereeing is time consuming and good referees are scarce. The editor of the new journal to which you are now sending your paper may be quite happy to accept the original referees’ reports and your revision without imposing on a new set of referees and further delaying the entire publication process. This is especially likely to occur if the reasons for rejection from the original journal were because you had selected an inappropriate journal or had simply aimed “too high”. Not all scientists will win a Nobel Prize, but that does not mean their work should not be published. Authors might find their paper rejected because an editor considered it “too narrow” or lacking “international interest” (too parochial), which simply means that the editor thinks it won’t be cited often enough to lift the journal’s impact factor. This is one of the tragic consequences of the current and growing emphasis on impact factors — good work, of regional importance, is finding publication opportunities restricted.

Step six, be patient and give editors and referees time to review and process your manuscript. We are all busy and your paper may not be the most urgent, or even the most important, thing in a referee’s life, notwithstanding its importance to you. Nonetheless, you should expect to have the submission of

your paper acknowledged promptly and to have referees' reports, or at least an update from the editor, within 6 to 12 weeks of submission. It can take longer for referees, but after 12 weeks you are entitled to inquire politely as to progress. Papers do get lost and editors appreciate being reminded when the review process is taking too long, at least the editors of *Pacific Conservation Biology* so appreciate. The role of a journal editor is to see that the best possible research or review material is published. Contrary to widespread belief, it is not to make life difficult for would-be authors.

While on the subject of referees and the time taken to process manuscripts for publication, authors should be aware of their own responsibilities as referees. Many authors submitting manuscripts expect their work to be reviewed promptly, but do not extend the same courtesy to other people when they are asked to conduct reviews. A rule of thumb is that one should expect to review twice as many manuscripts as they are submitting. Once agreeing to review a manuscript, it is the responsibility of a referee to do so as promptly as possible, and if there are good reasons for delay, then advising the editor of exactly when the review can be expected is essential.

Step seven, on receiving referees' reports acknowledge their receipt, say thank you (even if you are annoyed at the comments) and revise the paper following the advice given. As author, you are not required to make all the changes or corrections suggested by referees and editors (although any comments on journal style and format do need to be followed), but you should briefly advise the editor of how the paper was revised and explain why particular recommendations have not been followed when submitting the revised paper. Do think carefully, though, before you disregard a reviewer's request and defend your decision in your reply to the editor. For example, if you feel that no change is needed because the reviewer misunderstood the point, is this the fault of the reviewer or the clarity of your writing? If the reviewer has made an error of fact, provide a concise, convincing rebuttal to the editor. After all, the editor chose the reviewers and values their opinions, so if you disagree you should explain your position. If you require clarification or further assistance from referees, do not hesitate to ask for it. This is one reason why *Pacific Conservation Biology* discourages anonymous reports from referees.

Finally, if your paper is not accepted, it is not the end of the world. Everyone has papers rejected, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes for reasons that are not so good and can be hard to understand. Just say thank you and try

again. There are lots of journals and if your research was worth doing in the first place, it is worth the effort to try a third, fourth or Nth Journal.

*Pacific Conservation Biology* has an editorial ethic that encourages publication and extends to assisting new authors especially to work their way through the publication maze with the least pain. Writing and publishing papers is not just about completing research or compiling a citation profile to dazzle Deans and granting agencies with; it is also about the satisfaction of a job well-done. It should also be fun.

Harry F. Recher  
Mike C. Calver  
Denis A. Saunders

### Publisher's note

From June 2009, *Pacific Conservation Biology* will be available on-line through data bases managed by Informit. Many universities and government departments will have access through their own subscriptions to Informit. Individuals without such institutional access can purchase pdfs of articles or view them using a pay by view service. Selected articles from back issues are available already and it is planned to extend these to cover all articles published from Volume 1 Number 1 (1993) by the end of June 2009. The on-line availability will remain one issue behind the subscription availability, so if you want the latest issue as soon as it is available you will need to maintain a personal subscription.

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3. Click the tab "Find relevant data bases" and type "Pacific Conservation Biology" in the search box.
4. Select all data bases that display "Full text available" and then click "continue". (Currently only APAFT offers full text and that is only for selected articles. Full text for all articles published since 1993 will become available on the e-library data base).
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