



# Special issues in *Pacific Conservation Biology* – an update

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Three years have passed since I last provided guidance on preparing special issues for *Pacific Conservation Biology* (Calver 2020). During that time the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) initiated discussion on determining best practices for what they call ‘guest-edited collections,’ while there have also been changes in the formatting and processing of contributions to *Pacific Conservation Biology*. It is therefore timely to examine COPE’s concerns, as well as to update readers on the relevant changes at *Pacific Conservation Biology*.

In the discussion below I use the term ‘special issue’ to cover any topical collection of papers in *Pacific Conservation Biology* with a guest editor or editors; COPE incorporates such special issues together with collections called ‘... research topics, hot topics, themed collections, compilations, conference proceedings issues’ as ‘guest-edited collections.’ Other names include ‘thematic issues, monographic issues or supplements’ (Repiso *et al.* 2021, p. 593). Such collections are commonly the responsibility of guest editors, who solicit contributions, arrange reviewing, edit, and make recommendations on inclusion.

## Good features of guest-edited collections, including special issues

In some ways, special issues resemble edited books. Both collate relevant papers on important topics which, if the papers are solicited and edited carefully, focus authors, reviewers and editors to provide insights or syntheses absent when contributions appear in multiple sources. By bringing relevant perspectives together in one place, special issues and edited books facilitate searching by researchers or practitioners seeking a rapid introduction to a topic. Special issues have an advantage in speed of publication over books, as well as a greater chance of being included in major databases such as Web of Science or Scopus (although both these databases now include books from a range of publishers, some publishers are still omitted).

## COPE concerns and recommendations

At present, COPE has raised guest-edited collections in a discussion paper, which is not formal policy but intended to promote discussion and debate (COPE 2023). Thus, the matters summarised below are not policy, but discussion points.

## What can go wrong?

COPE (2023) notes several possible abuses of guest-edited collections, including organised fraud, financial conflicts of interest, publication clubs and citation cartels, opportunities for paper mills, and lack of ethical oversight. As one example, Pinna *et al.* (2020) describe how, in 2019, they agreed to a proposal for a special issue entitled ‘Role of Nanotechnology and Internet of Things in Healthcare,’ apparently from leading scientists, for inclusion in the *Journal of Nanoparticle Research*. When poor-quality contributions that did not fit the scope of the special issue were submitted, investigations revealed that the special issue was a scam designed ‘to infiltrate scientific journals with the objective of easily publishing manuscripts from pseudo-scientists or less productive researchers who want to appear in respectable journals’ (Pinna *et al.* 2020, p. 2). In a second case, described on

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**Retraction Watch (2023)**, a professor at Hong Kong Polytechnic University used a student's email account to edit a special issue in *The Journal of Environmental and Public Health* and another in *Computational Intelligence and Neuroscience*. Papers in the special issues showed signs of authorship by paper mills.

As noted by **Else (2021)**, the big risk is guilt by association. If some special issues include fraudulent contributions or involve another ethical dilemma, other special issues are implicated.

### What action can be taken?

**COPE (2023)** suggests detailed checklists for journals and publishers regarding creating, editing, and ethically supervising the production of guest-edited issues. In summary, they require acknowledging that involving guest editors might increase the risk of a range of unethical practices around peer review, fraudulent content, financial conflict, manipulation of citations and even identity theft. Problems can be reduced if guest editors are supported with clear guidance on their responsibilities and, if any unethical practice is suspected, there should be thorough investigation. Ultimately, responsibility for published content rests with the editor-in-chief, who should have oversight of the production of special issues or other collections involving guest editors.

### What happens at *Pacific Conservation Biology*?

At *Pacific Conservation Biology* proposals for special issues are considered by the editor-in-chief and the publisher, who check for alignment of the topic with the scope of the journal, as well as a good match between the topic and the guest editor(s)' expertise and records. Once the decision is made to proceed, the editor-in-chief introduces the guest editor(s) to the journal management software and, with assistance from the editorial team and the production resources of the publisher, provides guidance on its use. While the guest editor(s) solicit contributions, coordinate peer review, and recommend decisions, all recommendations on manuscripts (reject, major revision, minor revision, accept) are checked by the editor-in-chief, who sends the final decision email to the corresponding author. Therefore, *Pacific Conservation Biology* has procedures in place to guard against the concerns raised by COPE.

### Planning a special issue for *Pacific Conservation Biology*

Here are some points to consider if you are thinking of proposing a special issue for *Pacific Conservation Biology*.

The text follows closely the earlier editorial **Calver (2020)**, incorporating some updates that have occurred since then.

### Coverage

The scope statement on the *Pacific Conservation Biology* website indicates clearly the types of material suitable for general submission and also for special issues: '*Pacific Conservation Biology* is an international journal for publication of articles relevant to conservation biology and wildlife management in the Pacific region. 'Pacific' is taken broadly to include the western Pacific (East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and Oceania) the north Pacific (including Russia), and the islands of the central Pacific across to countries on the North American and South American continents bordering on the eastern Pacific' (<https://www.publish.csiro.au/pc/forauthors/scope>). Topics of regional significance are fine – as the title indicates, *Pacific Conservation Biology* serves a region. However, a wider readership can often be gained if a special issue on a regional interest is introduced by a paper explaining how that regional interest reflects general principles applicable beyond the region.

### Cost

*Pacific Conservation Biology* has no page charges for standard publications unless authors wish their paper to be available by Open Access (OA) (see below). Now that the journal is available solely online, there are also no charges for colour figures.

### Open Access

Many consider that OA publication is vital in conservation biology because the research is then available freely to all, irrespective of institutional subscriptions – there is no paywall. Furthermore, authors of OA papers may place the final publisher's PDF of the paper online in institutional repositories or on personal websites to increase access. Some also argue that OA papers are more heavily cited, although this view is not supported by all relevant empirical studies and any citation advantage is likely to be eroded as higher percentages of papers are published OA.

Those who have followed CSIRO Publishing's OA policy at <http://www.publish.csiro.au/pc/forauthors/openaccess> will have noticed some significant changes in recent years concerning Read and Publish agreements, which allow authors from participating institutions to publish OA in *Pacific Conservation Biology* without personally paying for the costs. To take advantage of these agreements, the corresponding author must be affiliated with an institution with a current Read and Publish agreement (the complete list is available at <https://www.publish.csiro.au/journals/openaccess/ReadandPublish#2>).

If the corresponding author is not covered by a Read and Publish agreement, authors may still freely post online the accepted Microsoft Word version of their paper (with a link to the final journal DOI). OA for the publisher's PDF is available for a fee; at the time of publishing, the standard Author Publication Fee for an OA publication is AU\$3300. One point to think about if the special issue has a sponsor is whether the sponsor is willing to meet the OA charges for any papers not covered by a Read and Publish agreement. If so, the publisher's PDFs for all papers in the special issue can be circulated widely. Note, though, that there may be conflicts of interest involved if the sponsor has a financial interest in the papers. If in doubt, please refer to the CSIRO Publishing conflict of interest guidelines (<https://www.publish.csiro.au/journals/publishingpolicies#3>) or discuss the matter with the Editor-in-Chief.

## Length

Please ensure that proposals indicate the number of papers proposed – up to 10 will make a solid issue. It is common for the special issue editors to include an introductory paper to set the scene, as well as a concluding one that draws the themes of the special issue together.

Special issue editors may allow lengths of individual papers to exceed the word counts quoted on the journal website if the editors feel that the subject matter justifies the extra length. Unnecessarily prolix papers should, though, be reduced to the recommended word limit.

## Timelines

Almost every special issue editor comments that the timeline turned out to be longer than they envisaged. Regardless of their experience authors can overcommit and take longer to finish than they anticipated, while reviewers (who give their time and expertise without reward) may sometimes be tardy too.

The key events to timetable are:

- Reviewing – it is prudent to allow at least 2 months between the submission deadline and receipt of all reviews.
- Revisions – allow a further 2 months.
- Editorial exchanges and discussion over controversial issues – again, 2 months is a good allowance.
- Copy editing, layout and proofing – 1 month is needed.

All up, that is 7 months from the deadline for first submissions without any serious problems along the way. If you add another 2 months for possible delays and 3 months pre-submission deadline for authors to prepare their papers and the timeline has spun out to 14 months.

Sometimes editors plan for a special issue to be available at a conference. If that is the case, proposals should be submitted as early as possible so that CSIRO Publishing can assist with

setting a timeline to ensure the content is ready in time for the conference. Help may also be available with promotion.

## Editors

A team of guest editors is usually assembled for the special issue, comprising scholars who know the subject, potential authors, and informed reviewers. In line with COPE advice, the *Pacific Conservation Biology* editorial team will offer support and guidance, while allowing the special issue team to design and implement its own plan. Recommendations on manuscripts are reviewed by the editor-in-chief.

## Possible contributors

The general guideline is that papers should contribute to biodiversity conservation or management in the Pacific, as outlined in the Scope section of the *Pacific Conservation Biology* web site (<https://www.publish.csiro.au/pc/forauthors/scope>). Proposers of a special issue should have likely contributors in mind, but thought could be given to inviting authors who will give contrasting views on controversial topics, giving opportunities for early career researchers as well as established researchers, and ensuring a geographic spread in invitees.

## ScholarOne

CSIRO Publishing uses ScholarOne software to streamline submission, reviewing and, if papers are accepted, production. If a proposal for a special issue is accepted, the editor-in-chief at *Pacific Conservation Biology* will provide a quick tutorial in the system so that the guest editors can use the software efficiently, because it is in everyone's interests to take the advantages it offers. In the ScholarOne submission system there are template letters for all stages of the workflow. An editorial assistant at CSIRO Publishing also assists in driving papers through peer review.

## Making a proposal

If you are feeling inspired, the best place to start is an informal approach to the editor-in-chief stating the proposed topic, whether or not the special issue will be connected to a conference or society, and the lead contact. If the response is positive, a short written proposal of approximately two pages will be invited, covering: title, rationale, timeline (note the details about timing above), list of possible contributions, list of possible contributors, and names and affiliations of guest editors.

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**Conflicts of interest.** Michael Calver is the editor-in-chief of *Pacific Conservation Biology*. He declares no other conflicts of interest.

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