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Ecology in Europe: is there an ‘empty’ niche for the new journal among competitors, predators and parasites?

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‘to do science is to search for repeated patterns’ (MacArthur, 1972)

We live in paradoxical times. On the one hand, it is difficult to publish in high-level, open access, and well-established journals, whilst on the other hand, an ever-increasing body of journals are being established, often based on an unscrupulous strategy of pay and publish. For publication houses, the market ecology is special (Sagarin & Pauchard 2009) in that, although fundamental, handbook examples of ecological findings come mainly from observations, long-time series and correlation analysis, they are now, almost exclusively, being replaced by experimental studies. We, the editorial board of the newly established European Journal of Ecology (EJE), think that good observational research studies, scientifically based theoretical, as well as opinion articles, including those with educational, public and political outreach, deserve their place alongside experimental research.

EJE is open access, and we consider this an important feature of the journal. Indeed, many national funding bodies now make publishing in open-access journals, a pre-condition of awards. In its short lifetime, open-access publishing has shaken the world of scientific publication by offering an alternative model to traditional ways of communicating scientific results (Villard & Nudds 2008). Furthermore, we have probably all experienced the frustration of a journal’s paywall and have had to ask colleagues from other universities, foreign collaborators or even the authors of the paper themselves to provide us with a copy of the article. However, these tactics may not be an everyday option for some researchers in developing parts of the world. Additionally, even when researchers can get access to global information, researchers

in some parts of the world (e.g. Africa) still tend to be consumers, rather than contributors (Nwagwu, 2013), despite the fact that nearly 50 years ago, the United Nations (1966) identified that it was a cultural right to contribute knowledge to a society (Fox & Hanlon, 2015). At EJE, we acknowledge that access to global information is of vital importance for research in developing countries. This journal benefits from start-up funding from the University of Presov (Slovakia), which enables us to cover the publishing fees until we become more established. Through our open-access and fees policies, we support ecology researchers from all parts of the globe to be both contributors and consumers. Furthermore, we would like our influence to go beyond the scientific community and impact the ever-increasing circle of non-professionals through education and public outreach and involvement.

The number of manuscripts submitted for publication in scientific journals has increased substantially in the past few decades, primarily because of an increase in the number of scientists. This competition has led to a pressure to ‘slice’ publications into what has become known as the Least Publishable Units (Grossman, 2014). However, some papers require more than a few pages to explain their lines of thought and methodology. Even in the electronic era, many journals are restricted by budgets limiting the total number of published pages. We feel that it is sometimes desirable to have articles in which authors are allowed the space to expand their concepts, explain their reasoning in more detail or provide a more expansive graph to bring home the message to the reader.

Researchers often have to use a host of journal attributes to help them select where to submit their article, which can result in an increasingly negative experience; some may even classify it as an intellectual war between generations (Statzner & Resh, 2010). This process leads to new problems for newly established journals. Kangas and Hujala (2015) asked how an author decides where to submit a paper for publication. In the field of ecology, for example, authors can choose from a wide range of journals, and if the paper is rejected, which is an increasingly frequent experience, the author simply selects an alternative journal (also see Aarssen et al. 2008). Realistically, many of the rejected papers are good, some may simply require minimal cosmetic changes, but the authors may be concerned about reviewers' comments, often being a devastating criticism, and the competition for journal space. In desperation, after several rejections, authors may occasionally opt to publish their work in parasitic or predatory journals (Beall 2012; Bohannon 2013). The former ones display sexy titles mimicking that of well-established journals (like a Batesian mimicry strategy), while the latter ones use aggressive marketing strategies with the chase-and-capture characteristics by offering fast turnarounds and publication rate, many a times without the appropriate peer-review process. Most researchers have had some negative experience with the scientific publication market, such as having to bargain about publication costs or having to deal with increasing volumes of spam e-mails from commercial pseudoscientific journals. This makes

the process of establishing a new journal, with sincere intents from within the scientific circles, extremely difficult. The initiation process is challenging and, at least in the initial stages, has to be based on personal contacts and mutual trust until it is well enough established in the scientific community and able to hold its own against the flood of multiplying parasitic or predatory journals (Fig. 1)!

The numbers of online journals is increasing almost exponentially. To understand this process, we must first revert to the basic principal concept of ecology, the niche (Pimm & Kitching 1988, Morelli & Tryjanowski 2015). In short, niche theory describes a species' distribution in terms of an hypothetical occupation of a virtual space. The entire hypervolume under which an organism can potentially exist describes its fundamental niche, whereas the portion of the fundamental niche that a species actually occupies (e.g. owing to competitive exclusion) defines its realised niche. We use this 'realised niche' to explain our envisioned place amongst scientific journals in order to not only avoid the recent dangers of parasitic and predatory journals but also to acquire a respected position amongst our distinguished competitors.

Paper inflation (Broad, 1981) visible in all scientific fields, including ecology, has led to a reviewing crisis, caused by a decreasing referee pool (Grossman 2014). At EJE, we have been fortunate enough to recruit a group of expert reviewers who are committed to their task. We as fellow scientists understand the dedication that high-quality research demands. Con-

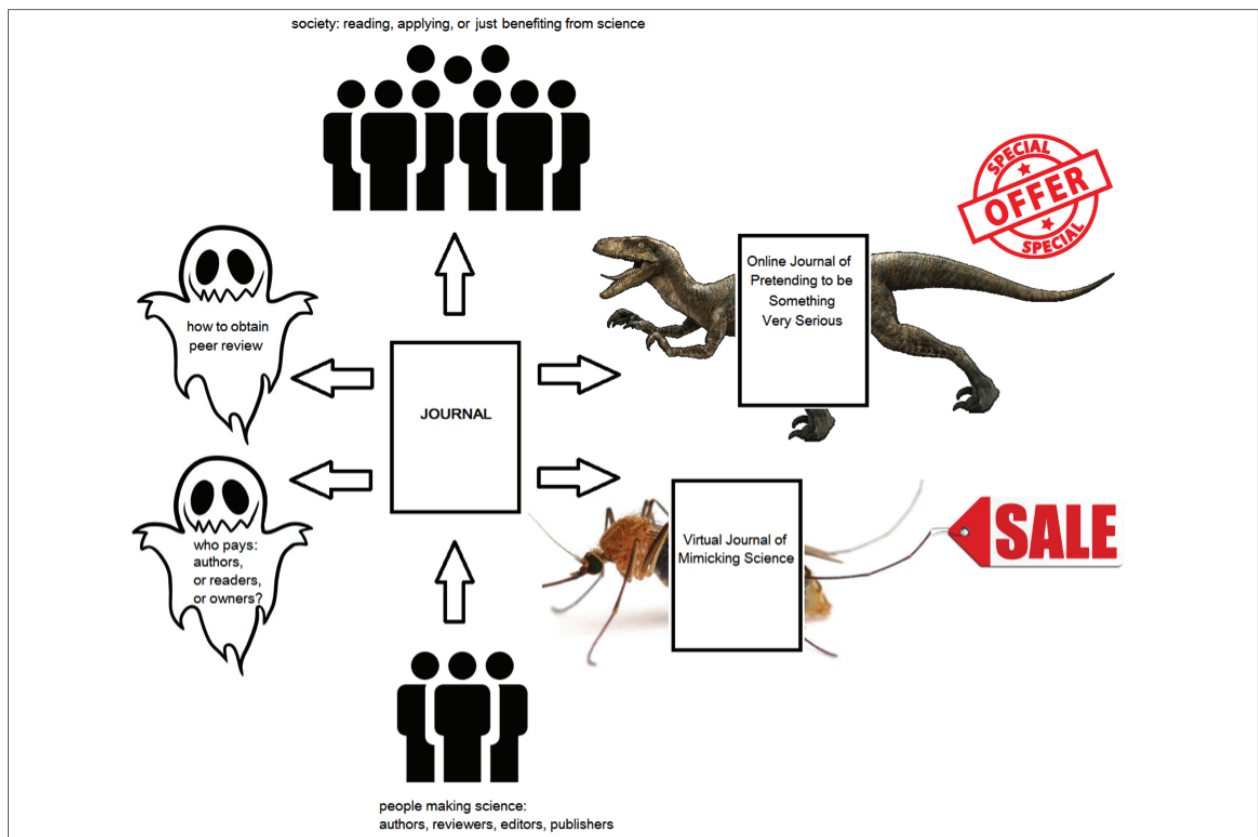


Figure 1. Community structure in which European Journal of Ecology is searching to fulfil a niche.

sequently, our reviewing style is underpinned by a professional respect for our fellow researchers. We also know the demoralising after effects receiving a destructive review can have, and we believe that we have an obligation to behave in a professional and courteous manner toward authors. Authors should be supported by journals, not punished with arbitrary procedures, lengthy forms with irrelevant questions, ad hominem attacks and sarcastic comments from reviewers or editors (cf. Hochberg M.E. 2000). This is particularly important for young scientists and early career researchers who need encouragement from the established community. Hence, our reviewers are encouraged to focus on providing only constructive feedback and specific suggestions that improve the manuscript.

The paradox of our times is intense. We cannot escape from the fact that all of Europe is at present in the grips of an unprecedented, multidisciplinary crisis: economic, social, political and environmental. Yet there is no consensus on what defines this crisis and how to handle it. Even the meaning of the title 'Europe' has become a matter of contention. Nevertheless, the same concern also relates to other subjects crucial for us, for example, 'ecology'. However, this is not really the time to discuss definitions and their intricacies, but a time for action. It has become imperative, with the backdrop of increasing competition and human distress, to discuss and look for a better understanding of the interactions between organisms and their environment. Ecology grew up in Europe and flourished in North America in the past century; nevertheless, European scientific solutions continue to be used around the world and are attractive as philosophical concepts, practices and projects. However, we as ecologists well know that disturbances and crises are a natural part of living systems; there is no static equilibrium, no eternal climax. As Czech poet Jaroslav Seiffert said: *Something beautiful ends, something beautiful begins*. Therefore, we believe that even proliferating scientists, publications and journals (Statzner & Resh, 2010) can substantially contribute to arising and dissemination of new information and new ideas around the world.

EJE encourages submissions that tackle a wide range of ecological questions, whilst being aware that this is a huge area. We, therefore, seek contributions (manuscripts) exploring any aspect in this field, including how philosophical ideas of ecology might (or might not) interact with questions pertaining to the role and function of ecosystems as a whole, and their particular parts. We aim to attract a broad range of perspectives, including philosophical concepts or projects that may question some modern dogmas of ecology and environmental

sciences. We are open to discuss controversial but intellectually well-explained topics.

Traditionally, ecology emerged as a science that focused on organisms close to the heart of the naturalist: trees, flowers, birds and butterflies. Now we see an ongoing shift from the 'ecology of the loved ones' to the 'ecology of all organisms' and one cannot predict to what extent the field of ecology will further broaden in the near future. Perhaps the first discovery of an extraterrestrial community of prokaryotes somewhere deep in space, or just a better understanding of the complex community of prokaryotes inhabiting our own gut, may give rise to new, formerly unsuspected fields of ecology. Furthermore, some man-made things are now being deliberately engineered to exhibit life-like characteristics and behaviours, thus nanotechnology, computer viruses or other self-reproducing automats are becoming increasingly relevant to ecology research. Similarly, advances in technology will allow for greater advances in philosophical, mathematical, molecular and instrumental methodologies of ecology in the near future. An example is that of the cheap and accessible polymerase chain reaction (PCR) methods, discovered merely three decades ago, that have already wrought massive changes in ecology and many scientific areas (e.g. taxonomy, palaeontology, medicine, criminology).

Therefore, we are open to consider radically new, even provocative ideas, provided they have a strict scientific merit. Meanwhile, we must also keep in mind that at the same time that many species are rapidly becoming extinct, the vast majority of the species on Earth remain unstudied, so there is still plenty of potential for those who restrict their studies to traditional ways/methods, especially research that promotes conservation and its understanding.

In summary, we strongly believe that in Europe, there is a cultural-cum-scientific vacuum for a journal such as the European Journal of Ecology – a journal we hope will be of the scientific community, from the scientific world, but of the global community. It may be 'European' in name, but we chose not to limit this journal to any geographical, subject or methodological manner. We see EJE as a cultural forum where people from different parts of the world, representing their respective cultures, and with novel visions, find a place to share traditional, innovative or even highly controversial ideas. If you have the will to write a paper explaining your ideas based on rigorously scientific material, we invite you to submit to the European Journal of Ecology.

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