

EDITORIAL

30 Years of *Functional Ecology***Charles W. Fox^{*,1}, Ken Thompson², Duncan J. Irschick³, Alan K. Knapp⁴,
Craig R. White⁵, Emilie Aimé⁶ and Jennifer A. Meyer⁶**

¹Department of Entomology, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40546, USA; ²Department of Animal and Plant Sciences, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK; ³Department of Biology, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Amherst, MA 01003, USA; ⁴Department of Biology and Graduate Degree Program in Ecology, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523, USA; ⁵School of Biological Sciences, Monash University, Clayton, Vic. 3800, Australia; and ⁶British Ecological Society, London WC1N 2JU, UK

The number of journals publishing ecological research keeps increasing. Over the past 6 years, Web of Science has added 20 journals to its Ecology category, an increase of 15%, certainly an underestimate of the actual growth in journals given the diversity of new Open Access journals that flood our emails with calls for new submissions. This proliferation in journals publishing ecological research would likely have surprised, and maybe even baffled, the founding editors of *Functional Ecology*. They (Peter Calow and John Grace) worried in the inaugural issue of this journal – published 30 years ago – that new readers might ‘throw up [their] arms in despair at the thought of yet another primary, scientific journal’ (Calow & Grace 1987). Yet, readers did not do so. Instead, many have embraced *Functional Ecology* as a preferred outlet for their work. And so here we are, 30 years after our first issue, still going strong and publishing influential research in ecology.

30 years of *Functional Ecology*

The journal has grown substantially over these past 30 years, in submissions and publications, and in profile. In 1987, the journal published about 50 research papers, plus a few reviews, editorials and perspectives. In 2016, the journal published roughly three times as many papers, plus a wide range of reviews, commentaries and perspectives. Even more dramatic is the growth in submissions; we do not know how many submissions the journal considered in 1987, but we do know that submissions have tripled since 2003, to 1150 in 2016. The large number of submissions we receive demonstrates that our colleagues in ecology are enthusiastic about the journal and consider it a preferred outlet for their research. This allows us to select some of the very best work for publication in the journal, but it also means that we must decline a lot of good work. The good news, though, is that we will be growing our page budget over the next few years – we grew our pages by 10% in 2016 and will grow another 10% in 2017. Whether this growth in pages will be enough to keep pace with the growth in submissions is

unclear, but our plan is to continually grow enough to alleviate some of the influence of space constraints on our editorial decisions.

In contrast to these increases in submissions and pages, the journal scope remains similar today to what it was in 1987. In their original introductory editorial, Calow & Grace (1987) noted that *Functional Ecology* would publish ‘ecological content but with *physiological* and *evolutionary* biases’ (italics in the original), but generally excluding population dynamics and descriptive studies. Their definition of ‘function’ included references to both the ecological (how things work) and evolutionary (what traits are for) meanings of the word. Today, we share a likewise broad scope. Rather than defining topics to exclude, we prefer to focus on the common theme of all papers published in the journal since its inception – an understanding of mechanism in ecology.

There is one objective of the original scope that we have long since forgone – an emphasis on ‘rapid publication of short papers’. Our editorial and peer review process is generally efficient and prompt, certainly comparable or better than similar journals, but we are not, and probably never really were, a short-format journal. Our current philosophy is that papers should be as long as they need to be, just not longer. We expect authors to justify the length if they go over 7500 words for standard papers, and we return papers for shortening when authors get unnecessarily long-winded, but we want papers to be the length they need to be to present their research in the most clear and impactful way possible.

And, unsurprisingly, the journal has evolved technologically in concert with the rest of scientific publishing; from managing submissions and peer review with real paper circulated and reviewer comments returned by regular mail to managing these on virtual paper circulated electronically and comments uploaded to an online database, from publishing in print alone (in black and white) to publishing solely electronically with full colour available to authors, and from relying on word of mouth to promote papers to promoting them with lay summaries, podcasts and videos, on Twitter, Facebook and our own journal website, and via electronically circulated tables of contents.

*Correspondence author. E-mail: fox@uky.edu

Until one has worked as an editor, it is easy to think of a journal as some black box you submit your work to, which then responds with a handful of peer reviews and a positive or negative decision, and occasionally publishes issues of papers (of which one, hopefully, is yours). In reality, a 'journal' is less the physical product than it is a collection of people – many of whom are your colleagues – working hard (and largely without reward) to manage peer review, help authors improve their papers, and promote those papers and the journal. The success of *Functional Ecology* is thus due to the hard work, dedication and vision of the huge number (many hundreds) of people who have contributed to the journal since its inception. The specifics of the *Functional Ecology* team – the editorial structure and participants – have evolved a lot over the past 30 years. In 1987, the journal was a comparatively small operation, with a pair of senior editors and two editorial assistants, located at several locations throughout the United Kingdom; this team was supported by a board of 20 advisory/reviewing editors from seven countries. In 2017, the journal team consists of five senior editors living on three continents, a large team of over 80 associate editors from 22 countries on all continents except that really cold one in the far south, each of whom handles 10–15 papers per year. We also have administrative support provided by a well-organized and professional team based in central London, that includes our Managing Editor (Emilie) and Assistant Editor (Jenny). And, of course, we are reliant now, as we were then, on a huge number of volunteer peer reviewers that contribute to the peer review process from all over the world. These people, along with all of our authors, have collectively made *Functional Ecology* the successful journal it is today.

New authorship policy

Authorship on scientific papers is still the primary mechanism by which contributors to research get credit for their work. Perspectives on authorship vary substantially among academic disciplines and even among researchers within ecology. To recognize the wide diversity of contributions that warrant authorship in ecology and to increase transparency and accountability regarding researcher contributions, the British Ecological Society (BES) has adopted a new authorship policy across its entire stable of journals. This policy has two elements – a statement of what is required for someone to be listed as an 'author' and a requirement that author contributions be described in an Authors' Contributions statement.

So what does it mean to be an 'author'? We have put 'author' in quotes to recognize that in contrast to the typical dictionary definition of the word, we rarely use the byline of a paper to specify just the 'writer' of an article. Few articles with more than a couple of authors have actually been 'written' by the full team. Instead, manuscript authors include those who have made various types of contributions – some wrote (or contributed to writing)

some or all of the paper, but many contributed to experimental design, data collection, data analysis, or a myriad of other aspects of the research. 'Authors' of a research paper should thus more correctly be called 'major contributors', or some such moniker, rather than 'authors', since the latter term poorly describes the actual contributions of the listed people.

In recognition of the fact that authors can have diverse contributions that do not always include the actual writing, the BES policy now requires that people listed as authors 'contribute to conception and design, or acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data, or drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content'. Note the prevalence of 'or' in the requirement, rather than 'and', in contrast to many of the more widely adopted authorship requirements (such as that adopted by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, ICMJE, which requires that everyone listed contribute to writing of a manuscript). We think that the use of 'or' more correctly reflects the contributions that warrant authorship, and better describes the actual practice in ecology. The specifics of our policy, including the responsibility undertaken when being listed as an author, can be found on our authorship guidelines at the journal web site, FunctionalEcology.org.

New friends and old

The journal remains committed to maintaining editorial board diversity, both geographic and gender. Our current editorial board includes 80 people, 46% of whom are women, contributing from 22 countries. Since our last editorial, we have had 30 new scientists join our team of Associate Editors. Notably, the proportion of women on our editorial board is at an all-time high – we remain committed to both gender and geographic diversity on our editorial team. We welcome all of our new editors to our team, and thank those who have been with us for their outstanding service to the journal and the field of ecology.

The coming year

In celebration of our 30th anniversary as a journal, we held a celebratory symposium (thematic topic) at the annual meeting of the BES this past December in Liverpool, titled 'Towards a mechanistic understanding of global change ecology: Looking forward from *Functional Ecology's* three-decade trajectory'. The symposium celebrated research that has long formed the primary focus of this journal – research that elucidates the mechanisms underlying ecological and evolutionary pattern and process – with a special focus on insights that improve understanding of how organisms will respond (or are responding) to our changing world. Although the symposium is over, there is more to look forward to; for example, we just published two virtual issues highlighting important work that

has been published in this journal, and hope to be organizing a special feature (of review and perspective articles) on this topic.

The next 30 years!

None of us can predict how scientific publishing will change in the coming years. Almost certainly science will become more transparent, animations and sound will become commonplace in scientific ‘papers’, and alternative means of disseminating research will increasingly compete with the traditional manuscript. How these changes will

impact *Functional Ecology* I can only speculate, but I can assure readers that we will continue to publish the best ecology research we can, and that our team will work tirelessly to make this (keep this?) one of the best outlets for research in ecology.

Here’s to another 30 years!!

Reference

Calow, P. & Grace, J. (1987) Editorial. *Functional Ecology*, **1**, 1.

Received 18 November 2016; accepted 21 November 2016