



EDITORIAL

The Poor Referee

Marine Pollution Bulletin has now been published for 30 years. In the last few years there has been a massive surge in all kinds of publications, with demand for space now being stronger than ever. In the last decade, this journal has trebled in size in terms of pages produced annually. What is also the case is that the number of referees needed has also trebled.

Two kinds of documents fall daily into my lap. The heaviest bundle is naturally new submissions. Crucially important but of lesser total mass are the referee reports on the heavy bundles of the month before. Not many people seem to realize that editing is sometimes necessary on these too. A scathing attack on 'moronic and useless' work to a timorous but hopeful Ph.D. student can cause them quite a setback. And abuse is difficult – I am never quite sure where strong criticism stops and libel starts... For the last four years my part-time secretary was someone who has just completed her Ph.D. on abuse in the workplace, and she advised me on several occasions that certain phrases which I might have let pass should definitely be edited out. Now, alas, she has got a 'proper' and well deserved job as lecturer elsewhere, so that guardian of authors' sensibilities is now lost to us.

But in this new Millennium I would like to offer thanks to all these uncounted referees which have made this journal possible. As administration increases its relentless grip on our throats year by year, time for such unpaid and unrecognized work becomes ever less. Yet, just as a football match cannot function without its much maligned referee, nor could this journal.

The compliments commonly paid to football referees ('What are you? Blind, deaf *and* stupid...?') can be matched by comments made by rejected authors back to me, aimed ostensibly at 'that idiot', but commonly with comments implying that my own selection of referee clearly demonstrated less mental activity than is shown by the giant neuron of the much experimented-upon squid. Indeed, some select turns of phrase in letters of complaint suggest a level of craftsmanship not achieved in the author's original, rejected paper.

But it is a new year, century and millennium and so let us look at the lighter side of this refereeing business. This journal, like all others, will need a great deal of input from referees in the next decade too. Implicit here is a sincere thanks to the more than thousand people I have corresponded with in this respect in the last few years. However, I am not especially enamoured with

those who, while expecting to have their own papers refereed swiftly, are much too important (their words in some cases) to perform this essential service for others. But they need not worry – their identities are safely hidden in the (unlocked) third hanging file from the front (that green one) in the second drawer just inside my office door.

I have meant to collect choice and amusing comments from referee reports from the moment I began as Editor, seven years ago, but I never got around to it systematically. But here is a selection of quotes which, I hope, summarizes many of the common sentiments. Maybe one was directed at you, in which case, as time will have passed, I hope you also are now amused.

From Referees

'I will have nothing to do with this man, ever again.' That was the full referee's report – all of it. What was unforgivable was that he did not say why! Had the author done some serious 'collaborative research' with the referee's wife, perhaps?

'I can't imagine why he thinks this work is useful. It wasn't 20 years ago either.' And a bit more subtle: *'I am pleased he has not changed the view he had 15 years ago.'* Some authors do try hard to recycle their own papers.

'I haven't the faintest idea what this is about. I don't even understand the title. Are you sure you have asked the right Jones?' Well, this Editor messes up too sometimes (only rarely, of course).

'My God, this is boring. Why did they bother?' Difficult to answer, really...

'He should seek the help of an experienced scientist.' A nice one, because the 'He' turned out to be the referee's own department head. This referee chose to remain anonymous.

'This paper is better suited to his own country's marine science journal.' The author of the paper was from a land-locked State.

'Hey! Wait a minute. This was my work.' An unhappy atmosphere was developing here...

'This paper is pure plagiarism. I am suing him already.' A US variant. Only rarely, fortunately, does it get this nasty.

Authors' Appeals Against Rejection

'You cannot reject my paper. I am a very important professor.' This is unlikely to receive a very sympathetic response, but it is wise for me to remember that in some cultures a rebuff to a senior academic is an unforgivable offense. Bad luck!

'I thought anything could get into MPB!' Even less likely to receive a sympathetic response.

'I shall withdraw my submission.' Which left me very puzzled.

'You rejected my paper because you are a racist.' A rather desperate appeal made to me at a conference.

Being a good conference, the bar was fortunately nearby.

'Please accept it. The Research Assessment Exercise is next month.' A more desperate appeal. The RAE is a British event by which our research output is measured – but that is the closest I will get to revealing this source!

'I am considering legal action' and *'I have taken legal advice'* are increasingly desperate appeals. For these authors, it seems that science has long ceased to be fun.

With many hundreds of submissions and an acceptance rate of about 40%, it is obvious that everybody cannot be happy all the time. It is also obvious that the work done by so many referees is huge and unrecog-

nized. Or is that really true? Refereeing invariably results in better papers, and that is valuable to us all. Authors are upset sometimes, but by improving a paper along the lines suggested, a better article invariably results. The readers benefit from that, and so does the reputation of the author in the end. The system of anonymous referees is here to stay. Happy New Year and a good Millennium to all of you!

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