

**WILEY'S PLANS FOR AQUATIC CONSERVATION.....
AND WHY WE WON'T BE THE CHIEF EDITORS ANY MORE**

1. Why we're writing this

On 1 January 2024 neither of us will be the Chief Editors of *Aquatic Conservation: Marine and Freshwater Ecosystems* (AQC) any more. This is not of our choosing, so the purpose of this commentary is to explain why. We feel this is important so that prospective authors, readers or reviewers can understand why our names are missing from the AQC website. This commentary will refer to an e-mail we received from Wiley in June 2023 telling us that our present contracts will not be renewed when they expire at the end of the year, and it will describe what has happened since then. It will explain our concern that the present episode will have damaged the reputation of the journal, as well as our uncertainty of what this might mean for the future of AQC.

2. Warning signs

There have been signs over the past couple of years that things were changing. For example:

- 2.1** It became clear that Wiley's aim is to make AQC fully open access, rather than retain its present hybrid status. We were (and still are) opposed to this, as we consider it will disadvantage or deter many authors – for example, those from Least Developed Countries and those retired but active research scientists, many of whom who lack the necessary funds to pay the high fees for open access. The majority of the AQC Editorial Board are also strongly against this proposal.
- 2.2** There were indications that Wiley staff disapprove of the number of manuscripts we reject. For example, the Publisher's Report in 2019 included a table titled 'Article Rejection Analysis', and sub-titled 'Top 10 cited articles rejected by AQC (publication years 2017-2020)'. The table included the title of the article, the submitting author's country, and the journal in which it was published. Seven of the 10 articles were on freshwater subjects and three were marine. We have read again the decision letters for those articles. Nine of the 10 were rejected without review, because the Chief Editors considered they were not suitable for AQC in lacking a conservation focus. Three of our decisions were made after consultation with members of the Editorial Board. One of the articles was rejected both because of its lack of conservation content and also because a significant amount of text was taken verbatim from another author's publication without acknowledgement. Only one of the articles listed was reviewed, and this was rejected because of its poor quality. Above the table in Wiley's report is the following sentence (the bold font is theirs): '**Almost all of the papers below were published in higher Impact Factor journals, with many authors coming from key target countries such as Brazil or India**'. In fact, of the 50 authors of these 10 papers, only 19 were from India and Brazil.
- 2.3** The apparent desire of Wiley to publish as many papers as possible in their own journals is reinforced by the change to the rejection system introduced a few years ago. In this, the editors now have four rejection options: (i) Reject and Offer Resubmit, (ii) Reject and Refer, (iii) Reject and Send to Transfer Service, (iv) Reject – Do Not Transfer. Of these, the purpose of the first is obvious; the second includes seven other Wiley journals to which we can direct authors who can choose if they want their manuscripts (and any reviews) to be transferred to one or more. We cannot comment on the third as we have no information on how it works within Wiley; the fourth is used only occasionally when we consider the paper is not of a standard to be published in any journal. Although automatic referral does not occur, some interesting comments on the principle of transfer were made in a recent Editorial written by 23 Associate Editors or Editorial Board members of the Wiley publication *Journal of Biogeography*, who said:

“Automatic referral of rejected manuscripts to other journals from the same publisher: We are firmly against this option because it influences both author choice and editorial discretion. Authors provide their content for free to the publishers, and therefore the choice is entirely theirs as to which outlet they prefer for their work. As editors, we are often able to suggest more appropriate journal outlets for particular manuscripts, and these outlets may or may not be in the same family of journals. Our service is given to the field of biogeography, and not to the publisher itself.” This is a sentiment that we share.

[Williams J.W. et al. (2023). Shifts to open access with high article processing charges hinder research equity and careers. *Journal of Biogeography*, 50(9), 1485-1489.]

- 2.4** Over the last few years, we have sometimes felt that our frequent criticism of the copy editing and typesetting of AQC was not well received by Wiley. Until recently we checked every proof, including changes and corrections made by the authors. This revealed two points of concern; first, that authors rarely check their proofs thoroughly, and sometimes it seems not at all; and second, that a wide range of mistakes either by the copy editor and/or the typesetter often came to light that we then corrected. We usually reported these matters to the relevant staff in Wiley. On 3 February 2023 we received an e-mail from Carol Clark, who was then Wiley’s staff member with responsibility for AQC, saying that from 1 March 2023 ‘... across all proprietary journals including AQC, we will be removing all Editor proofing...’ Since then we have not been permitted to remain as part of the proof-checking procedures, leading to our concern that some errors may not be detected before publication.

3. The present situation, Part 1 – June to September, 2023

- 3.1** On 2 June 2023 we received an e-mail from Pernille Hammelsø (Associate Editorial Director, Whole Organism Biology) – someone whose name we didn’t know, saying that our contracts as Chief Editors would not be renewed when they expire at the end of the year. This e-mail arrived entirely without warning, and no real explanation was given as to why we are now considered surplus to requirements. It came as a huge shock and a devastating blow. Part of her e-mail said this:
- “In light of internal changes at Wiley and external changes in the publishing landscape in the last several years, we have taken the opportunity to review our editorial setups and publishing models for several of our journals, including AQC. As part of this review, with great consideration, we have decided not to renew your current contract, ending in 2023. We will review the whole editorial set up for AQC and evaluate what is needed to take the journal to the next level and really embrace open access, just to mention one key strategic imperative for the immediate future of the journal.”*
- 3.2** Two weeks later, the summer meeting held every year to discuss AQC work was changed to focus only on the e-mail we had received. It took place online, with Pernille joined by Margaret Donnelly, who had recently taken over the responsibility in Wiley for AQC from Carol Clark. Pernille said that Wiley was in the process of reviewing the editorial structure of several of their journals, including AQC, but they had not yet made any decisions about what this new structure would look like. We asked why we were no longer to be AQC’s Chief Editors but received no real explanation.
- 3.3** We wrote again, asking the question:
- “If Wiley has made no decision on the future editorial structure of AQC, why has a decision already been made not to renew our contracts as Chief Editors?”*
- The reply said:

“As we do with other journals, we are setting Wiley and the editors free of contractual obligations, while a review is ongoing for any particular journal. This also applies to AQC..... Areas of research are changing, techniques develop, availability of funds is changing, new high profile institutions emerge and we review our journals to make sure they are in the best position to serve their communities, grow and capture the best manuscripts to prepare them for an open access future.”

It was later confirmed that moving AQC to become fully open access, instead of its present hybrid status, will not take place in 2024 or 2025, but it is clear that open access remains the medium-term objective.

- 3.4** Having kept the Editorial Board informed of the two meetings and the e-mails, many of the Board members wrote to Pernille and Margaret expressing dismay and disbelief at the decisions Wiley had made. Here is just one example to provide a flavour of the sort of things Board members said:

“I am writing to express my total incomprehension and profound disapproval of the current situation with the decisions taken by Wiley concerning the future of Aquatic Conservation: Marine and Freshwater Ecosystems, in particular concerning the end of contracts for the Joint Chief Editors, Professor Philip J Boon and Professor John M Baxter..... This journal has now established itself as a leader in its field, with a unique approach to conservation. This international reputation led me to join the Editorial Board. It is thanks to the quality of the involvement of its two editors, and the close relations that they have with the Associate Editors, that this journal has attained today this international recognition. If the current development of the journal is confirmed, I will withdraw from all activities linked to it (Editorial Board, reviews, submissions of publications, involvement in special issues ...).”

As far as we are aware, none of those who wrote to Pernille and Margaret received a reply.

- 3.5** Another direct result of Wiley’s decision was that five special issues that were under development (on freshwater topics) were cancelled because the guest editors no longer wished to continue working with Wiley. Since then, for the same reason, a marine special issue that was in the early stages of consideration is no longer being pursued.

4. The present situation, Part 2 – October to November, 2023

- 4.1** A long period of silence ensued from July until late September when Pernille asked for a meeting *“.....to discuss with you how you could potentially be involved in the editorial leadership of AQC in 2024”*.

- 4.2** We met Pernille and Margaret online on 12 October. They apologised for handling the situation badly, but clearly had not changed their plans for the future of the journal. The main points from the brief, 30-minute meeting were:

(a) They confirmed that Wiley intends to continue publishing AQC, but said that changes were needed ‘to take the journal to the next level’ and to respond to ‘the changing publishing landscape’. They did not expand on what they meant by this.

(b) We learned that they had been discussing the journal with 10-15 ‘key people from the community’ which seemed to comprise a mixture of AQC authors and reviewers, and a few people working on other Wiley journals. Unfortunately, they were not prepared to tell us who they consulted or what they were asked, or to share any of the feedback with us.

(c) They said that their review of AQC had included looking at manuscripts that we have rejected but were later published in other journals (the same activity as described in section 2 above). As a result of Wiley's review, Pernille and Margaret concluded that our definition of 'conservation' is too narrow so they will be looking to expand the scope of AQC, but again offered no information on what the expanded scope would look like.

(d) One of the biggest shocks in the meeting was to be told that they were intending to appoint a third Chief Editor and had been speaking with one of the two marine Associate Editors (Heidi Burdett) about taking on this role. They had not discussed this with us beforehand, and neither had Heidi.

(e) We asked Pernille what would happen to the Editorial Board. She said that Wiley would be issuing invitations to new Board members, and that some of the present members might be invited to join the new Board.

(f) Turning to their stated purpose of the meeting ("*to discuss with you how you could potentially be involved in the editorial leadership of AQC in 2024*") they offered us 12–18-month contracts to help ensure a 'smooth transition' to the new structure and scope, although they did not tell us what the new structure or the greater scope might look like, despite being asked. We pointed out that the model they were proposing would cause an imbalance in the journal, as there would be two Chief Editors (Heidi and John) to cover the marine submissions and only one (Phil) to deal with the freshwater manuscripts. Their response was to say this could be managed, although they offered no explanation of how they would do this. **In response, we said that Wiley's proposal was completely unacceptable to both of us, and we were not prepared to accept the new contracts as described.**

(g) After this meeting, our Editorial Board members began to resign. An example of a typical e-mail to Wiley said:

"I share the sentiments expressed by my colleagues on the Editorial Board. As a result of Wiley's handling of Chief Editors Phil and John and the proposed general change in journal approach and ethos, I am resigning with immediate effect from the Editorial Board. I will regrettably no longer actively promote or support AQC in any manner."

At the time of writing (mid-November 2023) 30 of the 39 Board members have resigned.

(h) Between June and the end of October Wiley had made no contact at all with the Associate Editors (AEs). Then, on 31 October, the two freshwater AEs and the second of the two marine AEs received e-mails giving them notice:

*"As part of the ongoing changes to the journal, we will be restructuring the Editorial Board under the new leadership of Heidi Burdett. This new direction requires us to modify the current roles, and regrettably, it means that the role of Associate Editor under this capacity will no longer be required..... That being said, **we would like to emphasise our desire to involve you in the future of the journal as part of the new structure**"* (the bold font was used in the e-mail).

Subsequently, some further details were provided:

"While the editorial structure is still under final review, we are planning to have a larger number of Associate Editors (around 10) to cover the diversity of AQC, and to distribute the workload between handling Editors. The Editor-in-Chief and the Associate Editors would be supported by an Editorial Board of approximately 25-30 researchers".

5. AQC as it is now..... and what we fear it may become

- 5.1** Before we finish this commentary, we would like to summarise for our readers how and why AQC began, what has been achieved, and our concerns for its future. We would also like to take the opportunity to thank all those authors and reviewers who have supported the journal over the last 33 years.
- 5.2** The proposal for a journal focused on the conservation of aquatic habitats and species was put in a letter sent by one of us (Phil Boon) to a commissioning editor for Wiley on 7 October 1988. After a long period of internal and international review, the publisher agreed to the proposal and work began on planning for the first issue. Phil was appointed as Chief Editor for the freshwater manuscripts, and his colleague at the Nature Conservancy Council in Britain – Roger Mitchell – took on the responsibility for marine, coastal and estuarine manuscripts. Roger was replaced by John Baxter in 1998. An Editorial Board was appointed, but Associate Editors only joined AQC in 2020. Before that, all submissions were dealt with exclusively by the Chief Editors.
- 5.3** Facts and figures don't tell the whole story, but for those interested we have published 33 annual volumes, containing 201 standard issues, 31 special issues/supplements (16 marine, 10 freshwater, 5 marine and freshwater), 3 special sections (1 marine, 2 freshwater), and 2,727 articles. The first issue was published in 1991. Since then, AQC has grown steadily: over the 33 years of its life, 12% of the total number of articles were published in the period between 1991 and 2001, 28% between 2002 and 2012, and 60% between 2013 and 2023.
- 5.4** The overview of AQC on our website has remained the same since its inception, and describes the journal as 'an international journal dedicated to publishing original papers that relate specifically to the conservation of freshwater, brackish or marine habitats and encouraging work that spans these ecosystems'. The 16 examples we have given of the subject areas published include 'Assessment of conservation value'; 'Status of endangered species, communities and habitats'; 'Protected areas and species'; 'Development of new tools and techniques for conservation'; and 'Legislation, strategies and policies for conservation'.
- 5.5** Our view of what AQC should be has always remained the same: a journal that publishes high quality science with demonstrated applications to conservation and management. Indeed, AQC is the only mainstream, peer-reviewed journal whose focus is on aquatic conservation. Where manuscripts submitted do not have that focus, but there are clear opportunities for improvement, authors are always offered the chance of revision.
- 5.6** One feature of the way we have consistently carried out our Chief Editor role is an active engagement with every stage of the publication process. This includes editing the final version of the text of papers that are accepted – a feature appreciated by many authors, especially those for whom English is not their native language. This is part of ensuring that the papers we publish are high quality, not only in their scientific content but also in the appearance and accuracy of the final type-set product.
- 5.7** As we look ahead to Wiley's intention of 're-launching' AQC next year, there are still many details that we do not know, and questions for which we do not yet have answers: What will the new editorial structure look like and how will it work? How will the scope of the journal be enlarged, and what priority will be given to publishing work centred on conservation and management? With only one Chief Editor – one with a marine background – what impact will this have on freshwater submissions? Will Wiley's desire for an increase in the quantity of

papers published in AQC reduce the quality of what is published? Will the publisher's aim of speeding up the process of publication lead to less attention to detail that we give at present?

- 5.8** We feel immensely sad that the recent events we have described here should end like this. We have devoted a huge amount of time and energy over many years to create a journal that has now become established, well-respected, and keenly supported by researchers and others around the world. We feel proud of what we have achieved, but the changes now being put in place by Wiley are not those we can accept or be part of. We will look back at the success of AQC from 1991 to 2023, and look on as bystanders to see what our journal will become in future.

Professor Philip J Boon
philipjboon@fba.org.uk

Professor John M Baxter
john@oceanperspectives.com

Chief Editors, *Aquatic Conservation: Marine and Freshwater Ecosystems*

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