How do conservationists choose where to publish?

Publication preferences in conservation

Natalie Yoh[1,2], Mukhlish Jamal Musa Holle[3,4], Jasmin Willis[3], Lauren F. Rudd[3], Iain M. Fraser[5], Diogo Veríssimo[3]*

[1] Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK
[2] Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison, Wisconsin, USA
[3]Department of Biology, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
[4] Faculty of Biology, Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
[5] School of Economics, University of Kent, Canterbury UK

*Corresponding author: Diogo Veríssimo (diogo.gasparverissimo@biology.ox.ac.uk)

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Abstract

Publishing in academic journals helps disseminate scientific research and contributes to a researcher's academic career. Conservation is interdisciplinary and, as such, there are a diversity of practitioners, scientists, and others who contribute to the conservation literature. Currently, little is known about how different journal attributes impact an author's choice of where to publish or how they may act as barriers to publishing in conservation-related journals. Here, we used a Discrete Choice Experiment to determine the interplay between seven attributes and assess journal choice between three demographic groups. Across 1038 respondents, we found that each group exhibited different publishing preferences. Only two attributes showed a consistent response across groups: cost to publish negatively impacted journal choice, including for those in high-income countries, and authors had a consistent preference for double-blind review. Based on our findings, we provide several

recommendations to conservation-related journals to reduce barriers to publishing and ultimately benefit conservation science.

Introduction

Academic publishing is considered central to the dissemination of scientific research (Medina-Franco & López-López 2022). Academic publications provide a foundation of scientific understanding to inform on-the-ground conservation strategies (Stirling & Burgman 2021). As well as research dissemination, publishing can also be important for a researcher's career progression. The perceived quality of academic journal publications can affect a researcher's likelihood of accessing future funding, promotions, and their overall legitimacy as a researcher (Hall & Page 2015). For researchers based within an organisation such as a non-profit, publishing in reputable journals also increases the visibility of the organisation and can be used to document impact. Therefore, authors must consider how journal choice will ensure the dissemination of their findings, how it will contribute to their careers, and potentially benefit their organisation.

Researchers face multiple considerations and challenges when choosing where to publish, including navigating the many barriers and biases that exist within the publishing sphere. From the author's perspective, such challenges can be divided into internal and external barriers. Internal barriers may include pressure to conform to Westernised journal styles (Hazen 2016; Prasojo et al. 2019; Oshiro et al. 2020), whereas external barriers may include bias against authors (e.g., racial or gender discrimination) during the review process, and biases in the perceived value of the research (e.g., scope) (Tomkins et al. 2017; Smith et al. 2023). For example, the conservation literature is still considerably biased towards authors from native English-speaking countries, studies focused on vertebrates in terrestrial systems, and positive findings (Di Marco et al. 2017; Stahl et al. 2020; Wood 2020; Amano et al. 2023). While the issues with academic journals have been widely acknowledged across scientific disciplines, few conservation journals have demonstrated initiatives to address them. For example, few conservation journals meet Fair Open Access Alliance standards and authors often face financial barriers if they wish or are required to make their research publicly available (Veríssimo

et al. 2020). However, it is unclear to what extent journal characteristics, such as publication fees, factor into journal choice and how this varies across author demographics and psychographics.

While there has been momentum towards greater inclusivity in conservation research (Cooke et al. 2022; Raymond et al. 2022), much of the responsibility has been placed on the researcher to overcome potential barriers, rather than for the journals themselves to work towards their removal. Different journal attributes are likely to pose unique challenges across the diversity of author demographics depending on factors such as career stage and nationality. In this study, we aim to assess how researchers in conservation science choose where to publish. Specifically, we assess the interplay between different journal attributes and how they impact an author's journal choice. We examine whether any of these attributes represent barriers to publishing and how this differs between researchers. We subsequently contextualise the impact of publishing decisions in conservation research and provide recommendations to conservation-related journals on how to reduce barriers to publishing.

Methods

Survey design

Our questionnaire consisted of (1) a brief description of the survey background, (2) questions related to respondents' demographics, (3) a Discrete Choice Experiment focused on seven key journal attributes, and (4) a section for the respondent to rank conservation journal attributes (Supporting Information 1). In the first section, we confirmed whether the respondents had previously published in a peer-reviewed, conservation-related journal and if so, how many conservation-related papers they had published within the past year (any author position). In the second section, we collected the respondents demographic information including age, nationality, country of residence, and racial identity. Providing such information was voluntary throughout the survey. We determined which journal attributes to include in the Discrete Choice Experiment following a workshop and online

questionnaire where we asked attendants at the International Conference of Conservation Biology (ICCB), 2021 about how they choose where to publish (Supporting Information 2). Following this preliminary data collection, we identified seven main attributes that informed researchers publishing decisions (Figure 1). We used these seven attributes to generate a Discrete Choice Experiment using an orthogonal design generated in IBM SPSS 22.0 with the initial choice alternatives coupled using a "shifted technique" (Louviere et al. 2000) into 16 trichotomous choices. We provided an opt-out choice in the form of "Would not choose any of these journals" (Choice [d]).

The resultant data were analysed using a multinomial logit (MNL) model and parameter estimates of the main effects were used as priors in a D-efficient Bayesian design implemented in Ngene 1.0.1 to design the final choice sets. Using 500 Halton draws from normal prior distributions for each parameter, we compared the mean Bayesian D-error of over 50,000 designs and selected the one with the lowest error at 0.1606. We limited the number of choices to 12 to keep the Discrete Choice Experiment design simple and to limit respondents' cognitive burden. In the last section, we asked the respondents to rank the attributes from the most to the least prioritised.

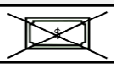
Attribute	Description	Options	Icon
Scope	*Whether the journal is aimed at a national, regional, or global audience*	Global	
		Regional	
		National	
Access	*Is the content freely accessible (open access) or does it require payment (paywalled)?*	Open access	
		Paywalled	
Impact factor	*The yearly mean number of citations the journal recieved for the articles published in the last two years*	No impact factor	
		1	
		6	
		12	
		20	
		40	
Editorial support	*Does the journal provide optional editorial support, either free or for a fee, to non-native English speakers or practitioners?*	No writing support	
		Free writing support	
		Paid writing support	
Review	*Do reviewers know the identity of authors? Yes (single blind), No (double-blind)*	Single blind	
		Double blind	
Society	*Is the journal owned or managed by a professional society?*	Yes	
		No	
Cost	*How much does it cost to publish in the journal?*	Free	
		100 USD	
		1500 USD	
		3000 USD	
		7000 USD	
		10000 USD	

Figure 1. Attributes and levels of the Discrete Choice Experiment investigating journal preference among conservation scientists.

Data collection

Conservation research is an interdisciplinary subject conducted among others by conservation practitioners, ecologists, geographers, anthropologists, and other researchers. We distributed the survey through (1) authors' email addresses that we collected from published conservation articles, and (2) internal communication platforms of the conservation-related institutions and organisations (Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) newsletter, and social media platforms). Email addresses were collated for authors who published in 18 conservation-related journals within 2010 and 2020 (Supporting Information 3). We collected the data using Smartsurvey premium (www.smartsurvey.co.uk), an online survey software and questionnaire tool, between 19 August to 3 November 2022. We offered respondents the opportunity to enter a raffle with the chance to win three 1-year memberships and three 3-year memberships for the SCB as incentives for completing the survey. Only respondents who had published in peer-reviewed journal articles were considered in the analysis. This project has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance from the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee [R77648/RE001].

Data analysis

Although this method assumes uniform preferences across respondents, we first used a MNL to evaluate the preferences of the entire sample of respondents. We used dummy coding in the model estimation (Table S1). We then employed a latent class model (LCM) to investigate potential preference heterogeneity (Boxall & Adamowicz 2002). The most effective strategy for dividing the sampled population into more homogeneous classes is thought to be LCMs (Boxall & Adamowicz 2002). The appropriate number of latent classes was determined by analysis using LIMDEP NLOGIT 4.0 based on a balanced evaluation of statistics, including Akaike information criterion (AIC) and Bayesian information criterion (BIC). To cater for the "neither" responses, we included an alternative specific constant (ASC). When "neither" was selected, ASC assumed a value of 1, showing the utility gained from not selecting any of the available choice options. Model comparison statistics have been generated for all the specifications examined (Table S2) and we also calculated WTP for different

attributes (Table S3). We investigated several model specifications related to both respondent demographics and psychographics. When we examined the utility functions by segment, we found that as we move from 3 to 4 segments, the results start to become unrealistic and unstable regarding the magnitude of the implied willingness to pay (WTP) estimates. Thus, LCM with three respondent segments was selected as the most appropriate specification.

Results

A total of 1531 people responded to the survey between 19 August to 3 November 2022. Of these, 1199 respondents completed the survey, with 1038 respondents (86.57%) reported to have published a conservation-related study in a peer-reviewed journal. On average, respondents had published a mean of 3.28 papers over the previous year (SD ± 5.26) and were 40 years old (SD ± 11.31) (Figure S1). Most respondents were from the USA (165 respondents; 15.90%), India (110 respondents; 10.60%), and the UK (84 respondents; 8.09%). Approximately half of the respondents (483 respondents, 46.53%) identified themselves as White Europeans/North Americans/Australians/New Zealanders, 12.04% as South Asian, 8.67% as Southeast Asian, 7.61% as Latino/Latina/Latinx, and 7.03% as Black African.

In total, we obtained 12,365 choice cards from 1038 respondents. Overall, the most important attributes influencing respondent choice were Scope, Review, Access, and Impact Factor. Whether the journal was society owned and whether it offered editorial support had negative values overall. However, attribute preference differed between segments. When asked to rank the attributes, respondents chose: (1) Scope, (2) Access, (3) Impact Factor, (4) Cost, (5) Editorial support, (6) Review, and (7) Society, from the most important to the least important. Although Review was ranked low, WTP suggests it is important in journal choice (Table S3). A total of 312 respondents (30.65%) stated that they had ignored attributes.

Table 2. The Multinomial logit (MNL) and latent class model (LCM) estimates of utility function for each attribute, including standard errors. Significance levels: *$P < 0.05$, **$P < 0.01$, *** $P<0.001$. ASC – Alternative specific constant.

			Latent class segments					
	MNL		LCM 1 (23.4%)		LCM 2 (45.7%)		LCM 3 (30.9%)	
Variable								
ASC	-0.241	**	1.037	***	0.557	**	-1.455	***
	(0.077)		(0.262)		(0.184)		(0.131)	
Global Scope	0.171	**	-0.053		0.817	***	0.547	***
	(0.052)		(0.181)		(0.161)		(0.069)	
Regional Scope	0.003		-0.015		0.475	***	0.237	***
	(0.037)		(0.146)		(0.094)		(0.052)	
Access[a]	0.354	***	-0.177		0.980	***	0.318	***
	(0.037)		(0.146)		(0.098)		(0.058)	
Impact Factor[b]	0.007	***	0.004		0.035	***	0.013	***
	(0.001)		(0.005)		(0.181)		(0.002)	
No editorial support	-0.415	***	-0.676	***	0.101		-0.495	***
	(0.042)		(0.173)		(0.102)		(0.058)	
Paid editorial support[c]	-0.547	***	-1.492	***	0.257	*	-0.660	***
	(0.050)		(0.201)		(0.122)		(0.069)	
Review[d]	0.188	***	0.725	***	0.234	**	0.226	***
	(0.028)		(0.089)		(0.074)		(0.041)	
Society[e]	0.079	**	0.290	**	0.261	***	0.054	
	(0.026)		(0.084)		(0.067)		(0.037)	
Cost[f]	-0.253	***	-0.390	***	-1.109	***	-0.169	***

	(0.007)	(0.038)		(0.081)		(0.011)
Segment						
Intercept		-1.236		-0.552		
		(0.331)		(0.316)		
High income[g]		-0.812	***	-0.660		
		(0.98)		(0.225)	*	
Age[h]		0.025	**	0.008		
		(0.008)		(0.014)		
Number of publications		-0.001		-0.017		
		(0.014)		(0.018)		

[a]Categorised as: "Open Access" or "Paywalled"
[b]Categorised as: "No impact factor", "1", "6","12", "20", and "40"
[c]Defined as: "Paid writing support for non-native English speakers and practitioners"
[d]Categorised as: "Single-blind (Author known)" and "Double-blind (Both author and Reviewer are anonymous"
[e]Categorised as: "Not society-based" and "Society-based"
[f]Options provided (US$): "Free", "100", "1500", "3000", "7000", and "10000"
[g]Income group by country as defined by the World Bank (2022)
[h]Categorised as: "18-20", "21-29", "30-39", "40-49", "50-59", "60 or older", and "Prefer not to say"

The LCM2 segment represents the largest group of respondents (45.7%) and indicates a WTP for all attributes. LCM2 comprises more respondents from lower income countries than LCM3. LCM1 represents 23.4% of respondents, also comprising respondents who are older and from lower income countries compared to LCM3. We can infer that the LCM3 segment (30.9% of respondents) represents younger respondents from high-income countries. Respondents in this segment showed a WTP for all attributes except for society-owned journals (Table S3), where they exhibited no preference, and journals with editorial support, which they were less likely to choose. We found divergent relationships between editorial support and each segment, where segment LCM2 showed a slight preference for journals offering paid editorial support over no support. However, both segments LCM1 and LCM3 avoided journals with both no- and paid- editorial support options. Impact Factor, Access, and Scope were more important for LCM2 and LCM3 compared to LCM1, but LCM3 were

WTP the most for these attributes. Importantly, we found no difference in the number of papers published between the segments.

Discussion

Overall, we found that journal preference was multi-faceted and no one factor dictated journal choice. Cost and Review were the only two attributes to which all respondent segments responded consistently, while other preferences demonstrated different publishing motivations or barriers between groups. Despite Impact Factor ranking in the top three most influential attributes, we found respondents were WTP little for higher impact factors compared to other attributes such as Scope and Access. We found that all segments published similar numbers of publications over the last year, suggesting journal preferences were not restricting the capacity of our respondents to publish.

Publishing costs

Cost negatively affected choice across all respondent groups, including those in high-income countries. Open-access fees can pose a financial barrier to all authors from institutions without Read and Publish agreements (financial agreements between academic institutions and publishers whereby researchers can publish open-access without charges), which includes authors with no academic affiliation and disproportionately affects authors in low- and middle-income countries. In the case of society-owned journals, these publication fees and subscription charges can help support activities such as conferences, education/training, and future research, and many learned societies rely on their journal-portfolio as vital revenue streams (Fyfe et al. 2017; Fyfe 2023). Nevertheless, these fees can pose a financial barrier to disseminating research, as well as posing a financial barrier to a researcher's career progression and access to future funding. Diamond open-access models, such as *Edinburgh Journal of Botany*, or initiatives such as *Peer Community in Ecology* (PCI Ecology 2023) are beginning to provide a free alternative to traditional open-access model journals. These non-commercial publishing initiatives offer the opportunity to reflect on why we publish as conservationists, and how researchers and academic societies can best utilise conservation funding.

Equitable publishing opportunities

There may be additional, compounding costs for non-academic writers and non-native English speakers, as most prestigious conservation journals require manuscripts to be submitted in English and conform to Western scientific styles (Chowdhury et al. 2022; Amano et al. 2023). As well as the additional time costs needed, non-native English speakers may be encouraged by journals to seek professional English editing services (e.g., Hazen 2016 *The International Journal of Logistics Management*). Our results support Amano et al. (2023) who found many authors, namely non-native English speakers from lower-middle income countries, do not or cannot access paid editing services despite an increased likelihood of journal rejections. Collectively, this suggests the option to pay for editorial support is not providing a beneficial service for many authors. By requesting authors pay for additional services, journals are placing the burden of responsibility on disadvantaged authors to overcome skill barriers rather than work towards equity themselves. *Conservation Biology* offers an alternative strategy to support authors through their Publication Partner Program (SCB 2023). This free initiative invites authors to partner with an experienced volunteer who can help with manuscript revisions, aiming to improve the likelihood of publication, particularly for non-native English speakers. Such peer-support strategies help to acknowledge systemic barriers and provide training and support to those who are disadvantaged by the current publishing environment, but may be hard to scale, and do not go so far as to question the status quo of English as the only language of science (Amano et al. 2021, 2023; Chowdhury et al. 2022).

All segments indicated Review clearly influenced their journal choice. Several studies have demonstrated how single-blind reviews offer advantages to authors from high-income, English-speaking countries across biological science journals, including in *Functional Ecology*, which is likely due to prestige bias (Fox et al. 2023; Smith et al. 2023) (e.g., where reviewers expect work from certain countries, institutions, or individuals to be of higher quality). Despite this, Smith et al. (2023) found only 15.9% of 541 biological science journals practised double-blind review, including universal double-blind review (e.g., *Conservation Biology*) or optional double-blind review (e.g., *Nature Ecology and Evolution*). In addition, we found younger respondents were less likely to

prioritise society-owned journals. As early as 2008, there have been concerns raised over the decline of young professionals joining academic societies, such as the SCB (Schwartz et al. 2008; Grajal 2009). Grajal (2009) argued academic societies need to explore ways to increase their value for younger conservation professionals and our research indicates there is an opportunity to do so specifically in the publishing domain (Figure 2).

Perceived research value and the impact on conservation

Authorship in journals considered to be high-ranking or have high prestige is perceived as important for a researchers career progression (Rigby et al. 2015; Nicholas et al. 2017). Although we found a slight WTP for journals with higher impact factors, a greater preference was observed for journals with a global or regional scope. Many of the most highly ranked conservation journals now prioritise studies with a broad geographical or taxonomical scope. Statements such as "global relevance", "…demonstrate[s] applications of conservation science and management beyond the specific system or species studied…" (Elsevier 2023), "…transcend[s] the particular ecosystem, species, or situation described…" (SCB 2023), and "…novel, broad-reaching and high-impact papers…" (BES 2023) can be found within the journal scope statements for three of the most popular conservation journals. In contrast, local-scale, single-species studies are relegated to lower-impact journals which do not offer the same perceived prestige. In doing so, this can devalue regional or local scale research which is often most informative for conservation practitioners (Stergiou & Tsikliras 2006; Calver et al. 2010). Previous research has demonstrated how career incentives often poorly align with impact beyond academia in the environmental sector (Rigby et al. 2015). Therefore, such valuation fuels a trade-off for researchers, especially for early-career researchers, between safeguarding their career and accessing funding, and contributing to local conservation evidence.

Future directions

Our findings demonstrate how journal choice varies across demographics and begins to tease apart differences between different income groups. However, our sample was largely dominated by respondents from high-income and upper-middle-income countries (51.8% and 20.1% of respondents

respectively) with few respondents from low-income countries (2.0%) (Figure S1). Therefore, future research should explicitly target respondents from low-income and lower-middle income countries to better capture the publishing preferences or barriers for authors in these regions. Future research could also explore how other dimensions of an author's identity affect journal choices, such as gender, discipline (e.g., social science vs natural science vs humanities), industry (e.g., between academia and non-academic sectors), focal taxa or ecosystem, career stage and tenure (Griffiths & Dos Santos 2012; Teel et al. 2018; Maas et al. 2021). There may be additional journal attributes that are important for specific demographics not represented by those at ICCB, such as peer-review speed for early-career researchers, that we have not captured in this study (Nguyen et al. 2015).

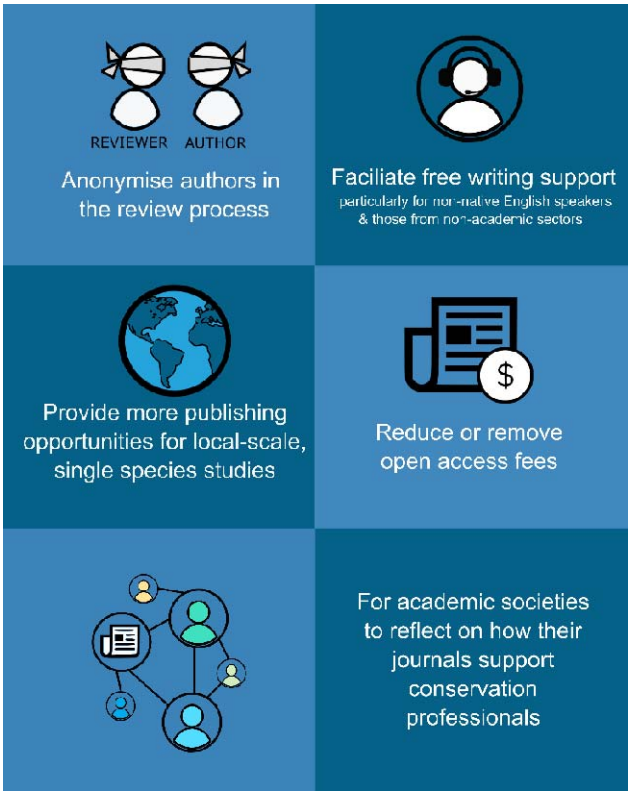


Figure 2. Recommendations to improve equity in conservation publishing based on our main research findings.

Here, we have outlined several ways in which journals themselves can impact the conservation literature. Given our findings, we suggest several recommendations that would promote

better equity, diversity, and inclusion in conservation publishing (Figure 2) and ultimately benefit conservation science. We also acknowledge that publishing is the last stage in the research pipeline. Many people will have already been excluded from the publishing process in the research planning and execution stages and therefore more work is needed to improve equity, diversity, and inclusion across the whole research timeline.

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Conflict of Interest

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Author Contributions

N.Y.: methodology, duration curation, investigation, writing-original draft preparation, writing-reviewing and editing. M.J.M.H.: methodology, duration curation, investigation, writing-reviewing and editing. J.W.: data curation, project administration. L.F.R.: data curation, project administration, writing-reviewing and editing. I.M.F.: methodology, formal analysis, writing-reviewing and editing. D.V.: conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, funding acquisition, supervision, writing-reviewing and editing.

Ethics Statement

The University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee provided ethics approval for this research [R77648/RE001].

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