

ECOGRAPHY

Editorial

Ecography's flip to a pay-to-publish model

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The Nordic Society Oikos (NSO) has decided to flip Ecography from a pay-to-read model to a pay-to-publish model. All papers published after the flip, in January 2020, will become open access immediately. As a bonus, all published papers since 1997 will be also free to read.

According to NSO, the main reason for the flip is that the subscription income of Ecography is insufficient to cover the costs of publication. NSO has decided that, given the current changes in the publication landscape, the best strategy to guarantee the future of Ecography is to change its funding model.

As senior editors of Ecography (i.e. Editor-in-Chief and Deputy-Editors-in-Chief), we witness these changes with mixed feelings. On the one hand we acknowledge that there is little justification for limiting readers' access to the scientific literature under a pay-to-read model. Most of the research published by journals is funded by taxpayers' money and the general public should have the right to access it freely from any Internet terminal.

In an information-driven society, it is also disingenuous to allow fake news to roam freely on the Internet, while keeping the highest-standard information ever created by humankind behind paywalls. A better world will no doubt emerge from open science.

On the other hand, we share with many others the concern that a pay-to-publish system will increase inequality among authors by creating new barriers to publication of high quality science and excluding from mainstream publishing those authors with limited economical resources (McGill et al. 2018, Peterson et al. 2019a, b).

Some argue that Open Access fees are often excessive and much lower fees should be possible (Solomon and Björk 2012). Although society-owned journals tend to reinvest any profit they might make back into the scientific community (Ecography does so in a number of ways), the argument raises questions about the need of greater transparency regarding publishing costs and revenues. This is important because a great deal of publication costs are indirectly subsidised by governments that fund the research and scientists whose gracious support as reviewers and editors guarantees high publication standards.

We would have preferred to postpone the flip from pay-to-read to pay-to-publish model to after the European Union's policy regarding open science – the so called Plan S (Else 2018) – has been finally agreed and implemented by member states. Our reasons are twofold. Firstly, Plan S might lead to imposition of caps on Open Access fees,



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thus partially addressing the perception that Open Access fees are inflated especially among high impact journals (Solomon and Björk 2012). Such caps are impossible to establish when small players, such as universities, research institutes or even countries, negotiate with oligopolistic publisher corporations, but they are more likely to be successfully imposed if large Federal Organizations take over the negotiations.

Secondly, Plan S is expected to include financial provisions to mitigate the negative impacts of a change of funding model on the authors, at least within Europe. Under Plan S, it should ultimately be the funders, not the individual authors, who pay the Open Access fees. If appropriately implemented, Plan S could also have a domino effect by prompting other regions and countries to adhere (Dchiermeier 2018), hence contributing to change the publication landscape globally. Of course, significant uncertainties remain as to what provisions will be created for authors, especially in countries not funded by the consignatories of Plan S but also within Europe. This is the main reason why we would have preferred a 'wait and see' strategy for *Ecography*.

Given NSO's evaluation of the financial situation of *Ecography* and the decision not to wait for Plan S to be implemented, we proposed a system of rewards that would achieve two complementary goals:

- 1) Mitigate the negative impacts of the flip from pay-to-read to pay-to-publish.
- 2) Recognise and reward the collaboration of our reviewers and editors.

The latter point stems from the recognition that the publishing system is, at the moment, one of the few economic activities that does not internalize all of the labour costs involved in the production chain: reviewers and handling editors are not economically rewarded for the important expert work they do for the journals (Van Noorden 2013, Coupal et al. 2018).

The frequent flyer's programmes of airline companies inspires the system we propose. Essentially, reviewers of manuscripts should obtain, for each review they perform for *Ecography*, a voucher that is worth a specified discount on the

billed open access fees of their next paper in *Ecography*, valid for a specified time period. Within the same time window, editors will obtain vouchers worth a specified discount for every year of service.

We also propose that discounts can be granted for those that do not have institutional support or other means of paying Open Access fees. An author's ability to pay should not influence any aspect of the review process, including the decision on whether or not the manuscript is accepted for publication. After acceptance of the manuscripts, if reduced fees are required, the professionally most senior author will be asked by the NSO editorial office to provide a statement detailing the financial need.

The changes in the publishing landscape are inevitable and the transition is bound to create challenges and occasional dysfunctions. *Ecography* is a journal of the Nordic Society Oikos and, as such, is committed to explore solutions that will enable adherence to open science policies while minimising the adverse effects of inequality that can emerge from them.

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