

Cambodian Journal of Natural History

Masked finfoots

Fire ecology in dry forests

Lessons learned from
community nest guarding

Eight years of camera trap
photographs

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Email: Editor.CJNH@gmail.com

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Cover photo: A tiger in Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre (© Jeremy Holden). The last known camera trap photograph of a wild Indochinese tiger in Cambodia is featured by Tom Gray *et al.*, in this issue.

Guest Editorial – To shed light on dark corners

Martin Fisher

Fauna & Flora International, Jupiter House, Station Road, Cambridge CB1 2JD, U.K.

Email martin.fisher@fauna-flora.org

*So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

Alumni of any of my *Writing for Conservation* workshops will recognize the final two lines from Sonnet 18 by the English poet and playwright William Shakespeare. I use it to illustrate how something beautiful – in this case a poem on the immortality of the subject of the writer’s admiration – can be expressed within the constraints of 14 lines arranged in three four-line verses and a final couplet, and with exactly 10 syllables in every line. This form, sometimes referred to as a Shakespearean sonnet, provides me with a convenient analogy to the challenge of writing a scientific article: how can you arrange your hypotheses, ideas, spreadsheets, statistical analyses, interpretation and speculation into a presentable, coherent form within the stricture of the formal sections of a scientific article?

Why should you do this anyway? Wouldn’t it be better to complete the report for your funder and move on to the next project or to whatever else is demanding your attention? It would certainly be easier. History doesn’t tell us whether Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 was written effortlessly in a few hours of inspired work or whether the 14 lines were a labour of days, weeks, or longer. There are some gifted authors who can sit down with a strong cup of coffee on a Saturday morning and – many drafts and much caffeine later – have a manuscript ready for submission to a journal by Monday morning. For most of us, however, the preparation of the first draft of an article is a lengthy and difficult affair.

But whether it takes you a weekend or a month, you eventually finish your article. We all have reason to be proud when we send the result of our toil – which started in uncomfortable field conditions and ended when we clicked the submit button – to a peer-reviewed journal. However, knowing that rejection rates are high and presuming that editors are looking for reasons to reject articles because the volume of submissions is ever increasing, anxious authors scan their inbox nervously for an e-mail from the Editor. When we finally receive a decision we

find that the reviewers have severely critiqued our work and our writing and found all the errors that we couldn’t see, blinded as we were by innumerable drafts and too much coffee. Nevertheless, it is my experience, both as an author and editor, that “getting published” is not particularly difficult. The majority of manuscripts are not rejected because the research is of a poor standard or the writing incomprehensible, but rather because the author has erred in his or her choice of journal.

In the *Writing for Conservation* workshops that I offer with the Conservation Leadership Programme, this is the first piece of advice that I offer: there are c. 150 peer-reviewed journals in the fields of ecology, conservation and natural history, and you need to research carefully the contents of a range of potentially suitable journals before you actually start to write. Every journal has its own character and preferences, and your choice of journal will influence how you tell your story. My second piece of advice is to learn how to tell that story. You are not writing about love in 14 lines of 10 syllables each, but you are nevertheless going to tell a story, and the number of words that you can use, and how you structure them, will be prescribed by the journal you choose. There are articles that do not have the now-traditional structure of Introduction – Methods – Results – Discussion. One of my favourites is the seminal paper by Hutchinson (1959), which all conservationists should read (it is even bereft of the label Introduction). But most of our articles are constrained to the required structure.

Both novice and experienced authors encounter problems correctly ordering their logic and their thoughts within this structure. Deciding whether a particular idea belongs in the Introduction or Discussion, for example, can be problematical. Ensuring that you don’t slip into discursive material in the Results can be difficult (hint: if you cite any references in this section you have almost certainly slipped into the Discussion by mistake). There is no magical wand or software tool to help you plan and write your article. No matter whether you are writing with a pencil or using the latest Ultrabook, the challenge is the same.

Once you have grappled successfully with the mechanics and art – for it is both – of scientific writing, and your first article has been published, you will be both elated and relieved. I still remember my first published article (Fisher & Dixon, 1986) with fondness. But was it worth the effort? Has anybody actually read it? I can't answer that question, but Google Scholar indicates that it has been cited only 10 times: hardly indicative of a large audience. If, for the purposes of a crude calculation, we assume the mean number of articles published annually in each of the c. 150 peer-reviewed journals is 100, c. 15,000 articles are being published each year in our area of interest. I believe it was once said that the English poet, critic and philosopher, and Shakespeare expert, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, born in 1772, was the last man to have read everything published in English. But even such a hungry reader could not make a dent in the number of scientific articles now being published each year. Who is reading them? Certainly most of us are reading only a very small fraction. This leads to a dismal conclusion: after shedding blood and sweat in the field, and sweat and tears in the writing, it is unlikely that anybody other than yourself, the Editor and peer reviewers will read your article. I would like to dispel a general misconception: it is not getting published that is difficult, it is getting read.

Whether you are writing for an esteemed regional journal such as the *Cambodian Journal of Natural History* or for one aimed at a broad international readership, your problem is the same: how can you make your article stand out in the noisy crowd? All is not lost: there are several ethical, and rewarding, little tricks that you can use. Possibly the most useful pertain to those parts of an article that are often most neglected: the Title, Abstract and Keywords. We are often so engrossed in the writing of the body of an article that we pay insufficient attention to these parts, which are often cobbled together in relief once the main article has been completed. If anybody does read your article, however, they are most likely to encounter it first in the search of the scholarly databases, in which keywords play an obvious part, and they will be presented initially with the Title and Abstract. It is with these two parts that you therefore have an opportunity to stand out: to draw you audience in, to entice them to read the full article.

One useful ploy is to try to attract two audiences – specialist and more general – using the Title as bait. How easy it is to do this will depend on how well you have told

your story. Most of the 15,000 articles being published each year are about particular species or places, yet also have a wider relevance. But if the title is mundane, it is unlikely to attract anybody except the dedicated specialist. With hindsight I'm sure that was one of the problems with Fisher & Dixon (1986). To put it another way: the title is uninformative and unattractive.

As an editor I encourage the writing and submission of articles. I don't want to talk myself out of a job here, but I would like to see us all publishing less rather than more. In achieving the publication of a vast number of peer-reviewed articles annually, I don't think that either the quality of our science or of our writing has improved.

This leads me to make two recommendations. Firstly, whether writing our first or our tenth article for a peer-reviewed journal, for most of us it is a tortuous experience. Make it count therefore: don't split your research into little pieces and write about each separately. You will more likely be remembered – and read, and cited – for one substantial, well-written article with a great Title and informative Abstract, than for a dozen lesser works.

Secondly, after the challenge of writing, the publication of an article can feel like an end in itself but is in fact only the beginning: don't forget this. Publication of an article in the peer-reviewed literature is not the aim of our research, even if the pressure on us to publish can seem to suggest that it is. Our task in our research is to enquire, to ask questions and test hypotheses. Ultimately, this is what we are trying to achieve with our writing: to shed light in dark corners.

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Editor's note:- Dr Martin Fisher is the Editor of Oryx - the International Journal of Conservation, and sits on the International Board of the Cambodian Journal of Natural History.