

Paying the reviewer debt

A COMMON complaint amongst conservation biologists, whether academics, government employees, in private industry or self-employed, is a growing workload. If sinecures ever existed, it seems that they are long gone. Many of the self-help directives for busy professionals tell us that part of the solution is to cull demands on our time that return no benefit to us, so in recent months several of my colleagues have questioned the wisdom of spending time reviewing manuscripts or examining theses. I disagree and argue that reviewing and examining are helpful to the whole scientific community, including reviewers and examiners.

Peer review is not without its critics, but it persists because of its value in correcting errors, improving readability and helping authors reach sound conclusions from their data. Every time we submit a manuscript for publication usually two, but sometimes three or more, people are consulted regarding their opinions of the suitability of the manuscript for publication. Thus whether it is accepted or not, the manuscript incurs a reviewing debt for each of the submitting authors because colleagues elsewhere have troubled to read the submission and offer their written opinion (often in considerable detail) as to its merits and suitability for publication. This reviewing debt can be calculated for an author in a given year as $(\text{number of papers submitted} \times 2)/(\text{number of authors on those papers})$. For example, an author who submitted four papers with seven co-authors would have a reviewing debt of one

$((4 \times 2)/8)$, and should expect to review at least one paper in that year. An author who declines all requests to review claiming lack of time is not paying that reviewing debt and therefore is subsidized by the rest of the scientific community who do review. Similar arguments hold for those who always decline to examine theses, while sending their own students' theses for examination.

Of course, this argument does not mean that one should always drop everything to accept every reviewing assignment that arrives in one's crowded email inbox. Sometimes the tight deadline for a grant submission, the pile of examination papers, a field trip or a precious few weeks of leave should take priority. For others, the price of a high reputation is that multiple requests for review arrive each week, so that many have to be refused or reviewing could become a full-time occupation. In all these cases, polite refusals are appropriate and appreciated by editors, who then know to look elsewhere for reviewers. However, this is very different from a blanket decision never to review or examine. All of us who publish or supervise research students incur reviewing or examining debts - debts that we ought to pay as part of our dues to the research community.

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