

8/24/2004

Dear Theoretical Ecologists,

At the 2004 Ecological Society of America meeting in Portland, Oregon, the theory section met and discussed the formation of a new Theoretical Ecology journal. I'm writing to the broad theoretical community to get feedback on a number of questions concerning this matter. Below I'm giving a brief summary of two reasons to start a new journal, and two reasons not to start a new journal. I believe these arguments satisfactorily cover the major points. After that discussion, I have a few questions that I would like to get your feedback on.

Why start a new Theoretical Ecology journal? I see two main reasons.

1) Our publishing outlets for theoretical ecology are widely dispersed across several different journals with slightly different emphases, many of them mathematical rather than ecological in focus. It is likely that only theorists will forage across these journals to seek out the ecological articles and separate them from the broader range of molecular, cellular, developmental, and evolutionary theory. A theoretical ecology journal would concentrate related ecological research into a single outlet, and hopefully attract more interest by empiricists and potentially inspire more empirical connections.

2) Most of our outlets for ecological theory are published by Elsevier, a for-profit publisher, which has been causing problems for university libraries, at least in the States. I'm not aware of the pricing strategies Elsevier takes internationally. For example, the *Bulletin of Mathematical Biology*, the *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, and *Theoretical Population Biology*, are ones that come to mind immediately. *Evolutionary Ecology Research* is an interesting exception which was formed precisely for the problems associated with for-profit publishers. If you are not aware of the issues surrounding scientific publishing and the negative consequences the present model is having on university libraries and scientific research, I have put together a few links on my web page (<http://www.biology.duke.edu/wilson/Journal/index.php>). In response to these publishing issues and with the development surrounding online publishing and open access journals, it seems important to begin an active role in this new form of scientific communication.

Why not start a new theoretical ecology journal?

1) There are already too many journals out there and adding one more will only make matters worse. This concern could be alleviated by convincing one of the editorial boards of the existing journals to move from Elsevier to a university publisher or an open access route. The most appropriate journal to take this action would be, likely, *Theoretical Population Biology*, but I have been assured that such a move would not take place.

2) Many of the ecological journals already take theory articles, and publishing within these ecological journals is the best way to connect theory to the broader discipline. This argument certainly is valid, but a certain threshold exists for each journal beyond which theory is relegated either to appendices or the more theoretical journals. This argument really is one that balances the utility of having theoretical ecology aggregated into a single outlet versus dispersed within the empirical and broader theory/math journals, and that which is deemed too theoretical (or empirical) relegated elsewhere.

Will a new Theoretical Ecology journal succeed?

A new journal will only succeed if it has the support of the ecological theory community. At this point, I have no real vested interest in whether a new journal starts up or not, but I have recently become more involved in my university's library issues, and that involvement has made me more aware of the Elsevier-induced crisis in scientific publishing. Starting up a new journal sounds like an interesting project at this stage in my career, but that's not to say there's nothing else interesting for me to do! But, of course, no one would want to devote the enormous effort required to make such a journal succeed if the community doesn't support it. Thus, this effort would really benefit from your responses to the following questions. In these questions, I will use Theoretical Ecology as the working title of the Journal.

- 1) Do you think there is a need for a new journal in theoretical ecology?
 - 1a) If not, what do you think is the most compelling reason?
 - 1b) If so, what do you think is the most compelling reason?
- 2) Would you submit papers to Theoretical Ecology if it existed?
- 3) How many papers per year do you (and your graduate students and postdocs) envision submitting to this journal? (This estimate will help gauge whether or not this journal would be able to support six issues per year at its inception.)
- 4) Would you be willing to serve on the editorial board and/or review articles for Theoretical Ecology?
- 5) There's increasing interest in Open Access journals, which are available for free online. University publishers are also beginning to take this route. This publishing format requires a shift from subscription-support to author-support. In other words, everyone gets it for free but the authors (or their universities) pay to publish in it. Without going into details, this pricing strategy results in income that reflects publishing costs rather than what subscription rates that are pushed to the maximum amount that libraries can bear. Libraries are increasingly hesitant to take on new subscriptions. Some universities belong to a coalition called SPARC, which provides free (or substantially reduced) publication charges in associated journals through coalition membership. I've read that this (or another) coalition also allows authors from something like 74 different

developing countries to publish in these journals without charge (but can't find that statement again). I am still learning about the details of this open access route, and the associated costs of publication (there exists open source journal management software which greatly reduces costs). I am well aware that paying publication costs (something like page charges) can be difficult for theorists. I would like to get a rough measure of how much theorists could afford to pay to have their work published in Theoretical Ecology. What are your thoughts on open access publishing, and could you afford up to \$1000 US per article to publish in this way?

6) It is my feeling that Theoretical Ecology should be as broadly construed as possible. I would like your suggestions for editorial board members from the areas listed below. If possible, please provide their e-mail address and other contact information. These should be people from whom you would honor a request to review manuscripts!!

physiological ecology
population biology
evolutionary ecology
behavioral ecology
community ecology
ecosystem ecology
plant biology
empirical connections
(any other major areas that I've left off)

If this effort goes forward, then I potentially would like to share your answers to the above questions with whatever editorial board is formed.

7) If you have any confidential comments you would like to make, then please make such comments clear and I will remove them from any communications I share with other people.

I greatly appreciate your time and effort. Finally, please forward this email to others you think might be interested.

Cheers,
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