

## Editorial

### The Ethics Of Peer Review

Peer review—that valuable tool for scientific authors and journal editors—is being abused in the field of plant taxonomy. Botanical manuscripts benefit from peer review for style and clarity, including organization, presentation, and compliance with the International Code of Botanic Nomenclature. Plant taxonomy, however, is a competitive field, where the first to publish gets to name a new species or rename a known one. For this reason, peer review of taxonomic manuscripts can do a disservice to editors and authors. The following case studies show how the system can fail.

A young author completed a DNA study of a plant group using 28 taxa and one gene region for her thesis, which revealed a polyphyletic genus requiring a new combination to make it monophyletic. The author submitted a manuscript on the study to a prominent journal, as she was a member of the professional society publishing that journal. It was rejected by the editor as reporting on too small a study for that journal. She next submitted the manuscript to a journal whose editor sent it for peer review to an established taxonomist working with that plant group at a prestigious institution (reviewer A). He recommended rejecting it as a preliminary study, noting that his working group was working on that genus in a large complex study. Despite a recommendation by reviewer B to accept with corrections, the journal rejected it. Three months later, an article by colleagues of reviewer A appeared in the prestigious institution's in-house journal, publishing the new combination proposed by the young author. The combination was based on a study of two gene regions using eight taxa, hardly a large complex study. Circumstantial evidence points to a reviewer who recommended rejection to delay publication of a young author's new combination, thus allowing his working group to publish first.

In another case, a plant taxonomist submitted a manuscript describing a new genus to a journal, whose editor sent it for review by a taxonomist working in the same family. The reviewer happened to sit on the funding panel of the group backing the author's research. As a panelist, he had progress reports of the author's research, reports considered confidential by the

funder. The reviewer recommended rejection, reasoning that the author's findings did not support the conclusions. He also sent the editor a copy of a confidential phylogeny from an initial progress report to support his recommendation. Not only did the reviewer release confidential material, he selected a preliminary unresolved report on eight taxa when he had a final report of 67 taxa that supported the author's conclusions. The reviewer's motivation was unclear, until it became known that he was a disgruntled ex-employee of the institution where the author worked. There was a happy ending, when the manuscript was submitted to another journal and published.

In yet a third case, an author, after completing fieldwork in Cameroon, using the French-sponsored Radeau des Cimes dirigible and treetops raft, submitted a manuscript to a national journal for biology educators. The manuscript reviewed the educational aspects of the international expedition and offered educators "backyard" activities and applications for use in high school curricula. Although the manuscript was accepted with revisions and published, one anonymous reviewer condemned it, writing: "If this article appears in any publication I read, I will cancel my subscription." Yet two other reviewers recommended publication. The editor ignored the spiteful comments from this opinionated reviewer.

Even though reviewer comments can improve manuscripts, and editors rely on them to maintain the standards of their journals, the competitive nature of taxonomy lends itself to peer-review abuse. For this reason, editors are well-advised to choose reviewers who do not work in the same plant area as the author, and reviewers are well-disposed to cast off anonymity and allow their names to be published with the articles they review, if requested.

Currently peer review favors established authors over neophytes. Yet rather than discouraging young taxonomists and biologists, we need to be recruiting them to meet the challenges at hand and those ahead. *Selbyana* allows reviewers to remain anonymous but encourages signed reviews.

—Wesley E. Higgins