

# Democratizing knowledge for conservation: *Oryx* becomes open access

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As I write this in late August, we remain in the grip—literally—of the global COVID-19 pandemic. With the necessity to maintain some distance from others, and often working from home, conservationists everywhere are discovering and learning new ways of working, communicating and teaching. In these unusual times, the value of a world wide web of information and of multiple means of communication and remote working has been thrown sharply into focus. In the *Oryx* editorial office we have certainly made extensive use of these facilities: in our case for editorial purposes, for maintaining our wide-ranging contacts with authors, reviewers and readers—and each other—and, like many others, for homeschooling our children.

In the relative isolation of lockdown, the vital importance of the global library of research and other conservation literature, accessible from anywhere with an internet connection, has become more apparent. Peer-reviewed scientific journals such as *Oryx* are an integral part of this library. As an interdisciplinary journal devoted to the dissemination of the results of conservation practice and research, *Oryx* has three principal remits: to provide a platform for authors to communicate and disseminate their findings internationally, to allow the potential audience for this research to locate and read this scholarship—and use it to inspire and guide their own conservation work—and to provide a curated archive of scholarly conservation research. *Oryx* is currently a hybrid journal, meaning there is no charge for the first service unless authors wish to publish their article under open access, free for all to read. The second service is supported by institutional and consortia subscriptions and through personal membership of Fauna & Flora International. The third service is provided by the journal's editorial office, working in collaboration with Cambridge University Press. This type of arrangement is typical of many scholarly journals.

But the full provision of the second service—access to read—is hampered by inequities in the accessibility of the peer-reviewed literature. Only well-funded institutions, most of which are in wealthy industrialized countries, are able to access the majority of this literature. This applies equally to the most recent research articles and to historical archives that have been digitized for online access. In the case of *Oryx*, if a practitioner or researcher interested in the costs of coexistence with elephants wishes to read the

lead article in the people and wildlife section in this issue of *Oryx* (Saif et al., 2020), or a scholar of early thinking on conservation in Africa wishes to read Worthington's (1950) article on the future of the African fauna in Volume 1, they would require access through an institutional library or as a member of Fauna & Flora International, or via Research4Life (the latter provides developing countries with free or low-cost access to peer-reviewed journals). If our scholars work at a poorly-resourced institution or NGO in a middle income country, or are without a professional institutional affiliation, they would struggle to access both current and archival material.

This inequitable situation runs contrary to the ideals of the democratization of scientific knowledge: that knowledge is available to all, irrespective of position, funding or geographical location. It is not a new concern. Ten years ago in an editorial in this journal Milner-Gulland et al. (2010) noted that not all conservationists—as either readers or authors—have equal access to the research scholarship in their field. We noted that:

'... the continuing lack of capacity in developing countries to access the scientific literature, either as readers or as authors, is both inequitable and a lost opportunity for global science. As journal editors and publisher we control communication through peer-reviewed conservation science and we bear a responsibility to act to improve this situation.'

For readers, this problem has been alleviated to some extent in the wider field of scholarly publishing by the move of some established journals to open access, and by new, so-called born open access journals. But readers without institutional or membership access to journals are nevertheless still only able to access a limited portion of the available scholarship. This is also the experience of conservation researchers and practitioners (Gossa et al., 2015).

Equitable access for authors is a more intractable problem, being hindered by matters of both language and culture. *Oryx* supports authors, especially early career conservationists, by providing a *Writing for Conservation* guide (Fisher, 2019) and by offering Writing for Conservation workshops when and where we are able. For authors across all fields of scholarship, the AuthorAID (2020) network provides support, mentoring, resources and training for researchers in low and middle income countries.

When the journal we know today as *Oryx*—which was first published in 1904—was renamed thus in 1950 and its volume number restarted at 1 to mark the change, its authors and readership were largely restricted to the membership of the Fauna Preservation Society, as Fauna & Flora

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International was then known. The renaming of the journal was just one of several momentous changes that it has undergone in its nearly 120 years of publication. *Oryx* remains available through personal subscription to members of Fauna & Flora International, but is now also available online at more than 8,000 institutions worldwide. We remain uncomfortable, however, that the most recent articles published in the journal, and the journal's archive, are inaccessible to many conservationists, scholars and natural historians. It is time for further change.

It gives me great pleasure to announce, therefore, that in January 2021 *Oryx* will undergo perhaps the most momentous change in its history: the move to full open access publication. To ensure the continuation of the journal's contribution to conservation scholarship, there will be three major changes. Firstly, the material published will be freely available to read online for everybody with a suitable internet connection, no matter where they live or work, thus removing inequities of access. Secondly, to help support this, there will be an article processing charge, which is usually paid by the authors' institutions or funders. Thirdly, publication will be under a Creative Commons licence, rather than a traditional transfer of copyright to the journal's proprietor; this may include the right for others to reuse, adapt or redistribute the article, depending upon the licence chosen by the authors. The move to open access will also ensure that *Oryx* remains available to the increasing number of authors mandated by their funders or institutions to publish in open access journals.

Flipping to open access publication is not, of course, a comprehensive panacea for democratizing conservation knowledge. In the same way that not all readers currently have equal access to scholarship, not all authors have equal access to funding to support the payment of the article processing charge required for publication in an open access journal. Much innovation is taking place in publishing more widely to resolve this dilemma, including, for example, the repurposing by institutes, research bodies and universities of money traditionally used for subscriptions. An example of this is the Read and Publish agreements established between Cambridge University Press and an increasing number of international institutions. The Publish element covers the article processing charge for affiliated corresponding authors from participating institutions.

As this new phase in the journal's history begins, article processing charges paid by authors from well-funded institutions will help to fund discounts and waivers for those authors whose institutions are unable to pay the charge. To ease *Oryx* into this position, The Rufford Foundation, a long-term supporter of the journal, have kindly stepped up. With their support, we will be able to provide discounts

and waivers of the article processing charge, as required, and we will also be able to make the journal's archive, from Volume 1 of 1950 onwards, freely available to read. Authors can apply for a discount or waiver when submitting work to the journal.

If, like me, you enjoy accessing the research and news published in *Oryx* at the level of the issue, the journal will remain available via a personal subscription, as it has been since 1904, through membership of Fauna & Flora International. Members can access the journal in two formats: in traditional print or in an online magazine-style view, available since January 2020.

In these turbulent times, with the increasing importance of biodiversity conservation thrown into relief by the spill-over of the COVID-19 virus from natural hosts to people, with future spill-overs expected as deforestation and wildlife trade bring more wild species into contact with people and livestock, and with daily assaults on truth in science and other fields of endeavour, the peer-reviewed scientific literature has never been more vital. As it has done for well over a century, *Oryx* will continue to support conservation practitioners and researchers to communicate their work. But from January 2021 this will be with a difference: the work of the journal's authors to secure the future of biodiversity and the environment will be accessible to all readers.

For further information on open access publication in *Oryx*, please see [oryxthejournal.org/about/open-access](http://oryxthejournal.org/about/open-access).

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