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# CONTRIBUTIONS

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## Rejecting Editorial Rejections Revisited: Are Editors of Ecological Journals Good Oracles?

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Progress in ecological research is basically driven by the publication of studies in peer reviewed journals. However, competition for space in high-ranking journals is severe, and these journals require an objective way to accept the best works. This “objective way” is based on the traditional peer review process. To evaluate the quality of a manuscript, it is sent to several specialists in the same field, and the editor makes a decision based on the reviewers’ comments and his/her own opinion. Overall, in a good peer review process everybody wins: the author improves her/his knowledge, and the scientific community reads a better paper; even if the manuscript is finally submitted to a different journal. However, more and more ecological journals are skipping this fruitful process and rejecting some papers based only on the opinion of one person: the subject-editor. This practice is becoming more common despite criticisms related to its subjectivity and inappropriateness (Farji-Brener 2007, Bornmann and Hans-Dieter 2010, Arnqvist 2013). The key argument to favor rejections without peer review is that subject-editors (hereafter “editors”) are able to easily identify the best works among the submitted manuscripts (Strong 2007). Therefore, editors reject papers that “definitively” would have received negative revisions if they were sent to reviewers. In other words, editors are considering themselves as good “oracles” in the task of guessing the opinion of external reviewers about the quality of a manuscript. We tested this assumption by monitoring the final destiny of a large number of papers that were first rejected without revisions by an editor.

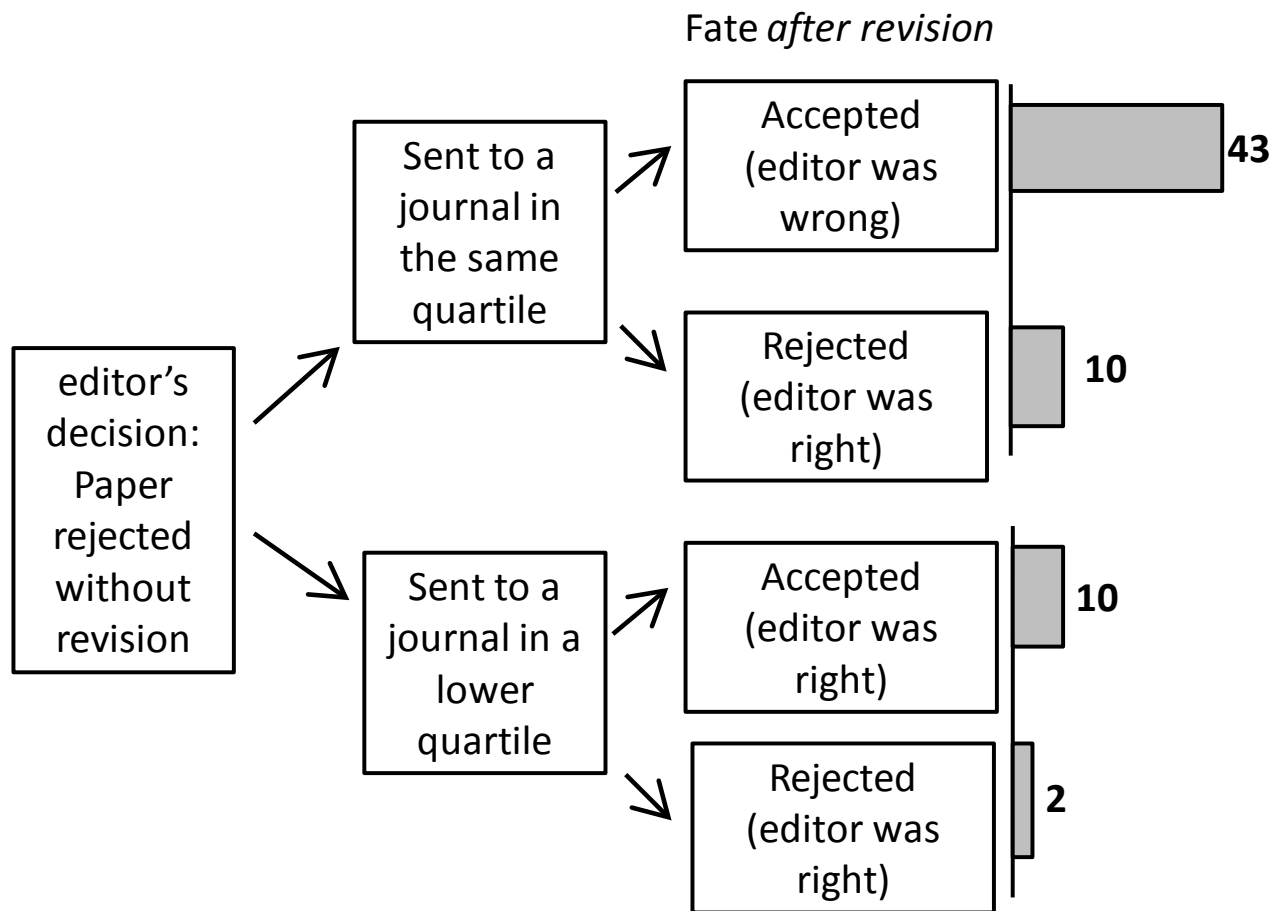


Fig. 1. Final fate of editorially rejected papers, which tests the predictive ability of editors. We considered editors as poor oracles (“editor was wrong”) when they rejected papers without peer review that were finally accepted in a journal of similar “quality” (in the same quartile of *SCImago Journal Rank indicator*). The other alternatives support the hypothesis that editors could accurately evaluate the quality of a manuscript without external reviews (“editor was right”).

We sent an e-mail survey to a wide range of scientists asking whether he/she had manuscripts that suffered editorial rejections followed by submission(s) of the same manuscript(s) (without changes or improvement) to another journal. We specifically asked for (a) the journal where the manuscript was rejected without peer review, (b) whether the same manuscript (without improvement) was submitted to another journal, and, (c) whether that manuscript was finally published or rejected after peer review. Different scenarios were possible after an editorial rejection: authors sent the same manuscript to a journal of similar or lower “quality” than the first journal where the paper was originally submitted; and in both cases the manuscript may be accepted or rejected after revision. To test the predictive ability of editors, we adopted a “conservative” criterion and only considered editors as poor oracles when editorially rejected papers were finally accepted in a journal of similar “quality.” We considered that all the other alternatives support the hypothesis that editors can accurately assess the overall quality of a manuscript without external revisions. Since no single indicator adequately measures the impact or “quality” of a scientific journal (Bordons et al. 2002, Alberts 2013), we used the quartiles of the *SCImago Journal Rank indicator* for the subject area of Ecology, Evolution, Behavior, and Systematics (<http://www.scimagojr.com>). The *SCImago Journal & Country Rank* is a portal that includes journals scientific indicators developed from the information contained in the Scopus® database. We considered journals in the same quartile as having similar “impact” or “academic quality.”

We gathered 65 cases in where manuscripts rejected without revision were sent again for publication to another journal without changes. Corresponding authors were dispersed around the globe (37 from South America, 4 from Central America, 11 from North America, 13 from Europe and UK), representing a mixture of senior, intermediate, and young scientists. After an editorial rejection, authors resubmitted the same paper to another journal of similar “quality” (i.e., in the same quartile) in ~80% of the cases, and to a journal of lower “quality” (i.e., in a lower quartile) in the rest of the cases (~20%). The final fate of the papers strongly suggests that editors are poor oracles. Considering only the subset of papers that were resubmitted to journals in the same quartile, ~81% (43 out of 53) of papers with editorial rejection were finally published. Only 10 out of 53 were rejected after the peer review process. Similarly, 83% (10 out of 12) of the manuscripts that were submitted to journals of lower “impact or quality” were published after peer review (Fig. 1). According to our conservative criteria, editors failed in 66% of the cases when they classified works as qualitatively inadequate for publication supposing negative external reviews. In other words, editorial rejections were often not supported by the opinion of experts in the field, i.e., they were academically unjustified.

Editors should play a key role in the peer review process, increasing the value of scientific studies by enabling publication of those deemed to be of merit. Accordingly, editors must be objective, trustworthy, and ethical, and should always have the best interests of the journal and its readership in mind (Grod et al. 2010). We detected a behavior in editors that compromises these qualities: the unjustified editorial rejection. The three favorite criteria that guide editors to reject a submitted manuscript without peer review are (a) absence of novelty, (b) inappropriate topic, and (c) scientific quality below the required standard. The first criterion was recently criticized because of its subjectivity and harmful consequences for advancing science (Arnqvist 2013). Here we present evidence against the other two reasons. Overall, ~66% of the papers that suffered editorial rejections were finally published in a journal of similar scope, impact, and academic quality (see Table 1 for amazing examples). Therefore, editors are far from being

Table 1. Representative examples of the poor predictive ability of some editors that rejected a paper without revision. The identity of authors is available upon request. Note the similarity in scope and “quality” between the journal of the original submission and the journal that finally published the paper.

Rejected without revision in	Finally published in	Author ID, country
<i>Behavioral Ecology</i>	<i>Animal Behavior</i>	AD, France
<i>Ecological Applications</i>	<i>Proceedings Royal Society-Series B</i>	NC, Argentina
<i>Ecology</i>	<i>American Naturalist</i>	PO, Brazil
<i>Ecology</i>	<i>Ecography</i>	JMRB, Spain
<i>Ecology</i>	<i>J. Ecology</i>	EC, Argentina
<i>Ecology</i>	<i>Oikos</i>	DV, USA
<i>Global Ecology and Biogeography</i>	<i>J. Biogeography</i>	HV, Brazil
<i>J. Applied Ecology</i>	<i>Proceedings Royal Society-Series B</i>	NC, Argentina
<i>J. Vegetation Science</i>	<i>J. Biogeography</i>	DR, USA
<i>PNAS</i>	<i>Proceedings Royal Society-Series B</i>	HF, Panamá
<i>Proceedings Royal Society-Series B</i>	<i>Evolution</i>	WE, USA

illuminati people, and the assumption that they could easily identify a large portion of the most exciting, interesting, cutting-edge science manuscripts (*sensu* Strong 2007) without the opinion of other scientists in the field is untruthful.

There might be several reasons why editors erroneously assess the “quality” of a work. First, submitted manuscripts may be evaluated by editors through a rapid and superficial reading, sometimes based only on the abstract. It is relatively obvious that reading the manuscript in depth is necessary to accurately assess the quality of its content. Second, editors rarely are specialists on the field of the submitted manuscript and thus may show biases in their appreciations. Finally, and probably the most important issue, the decision made by only one person is inevitably biased by the strengths and weaknesses of this person. For example, a recent study showed that three-quarters of the manuscripts that were rated negatively at the initial internal evaluation by editors but accepted for publication after the peer review

had far above-average citation counts (Bornmann and Hans-Dieter 2010). Metaphorically speaking, an assessment performed only by the editor is like having a study without replicates (e.g.,  $n = 1$ ), which compromises the reliability of the inferences that can be made from it (Farji-Brener 2007). This is the reason why in the traditional peer review process, papers are sent to several reviewers and not to only one.

In sum, our evidence strongly opposes the belief that editors are able to make an accurate decision about the overall quality of manuscripts without considering the critical analysis of external reviewers. Rejections of good-quality papers without peer review because of editorial pre-assessment appears to be the rule, not the exception. As discussed earlier (Farji-Brener 2007), the habit of rejecting papers without multiple reviewers weakens the spirit of forum that is crucial for the progress of science. Neither authors nor reviewers (nor journals) learn anything from evading reviews, and the only potential advantage of saving time for the author, is trivial and unhelpful for anybody. We agree that journals must establish quality standards and need to have acceptance rules, but we insist that it is time to rethink whether the scientific community wants to base these evaluations on a royalist criterion supported by the opinion of only one visionary, or on a parliamentary criterion supported by several independent opinions.

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