

How Important is a Quality Manuscript Review?

Greetings GPNSS members! By the time you read this editorial, most of you will be firmly embedded in and enjoying spectacular foliage and seasonal changes in the outdoors this autumn. I write this editorial during my favorite time of year, deer hunting during peak rut, in the Midwest. Temperatures are finally starting to cool a bit (for those of us in the northern Great Plains region) and Thanksgiving break is just around the corner. Each year at this time while waiting patiently in my deer stand for the buck of a lifetime to suddenly materialize from seemingly nowhere (I'm still waiting after 30 years of hunting!), I take the opportunity to reflect on how fortunate I have been enjoying my outdoor passions (okay, obsessions!), spending time with my family and friends, and reflecting on what is important in life. Of course, my personal reflections have no direct connection to the topic of this editorial. Rather, I offer them in the spirit of encouraging each of you to take a break from your professional obligations and spend time with friends and family enjoying nature and everything it has to offer this fall.

Okay, enough rambling and back to business. A frequent question I receive from manuscript reviewers is related to the quality of peer reviews. Referees typically include confidential comments to Associate Editors and I regarding the quality of their reviews. In essence, most comments can be summarized with a question, namely "How did my review compare to other referees?" Additionally, Associate Editors and I frequently deal with a wide range of reviews with respect to quality and attention to detail (Chamberlain 2008). As is very often the case, one referee typically provides a very detailed and highly relevant review, whereas the other referee provides a superficial review and cursory comments of little relevance (Chamberlain 2008). Such instances create difficult situations for Associate Editors tasked with overseeing the peer-review process in conjunction with outside peer-reviews, and ultimately me, because rendering decisions on manuscripts become increasingly difficult without the benefit of 2 quality reviews. Below I summarize what I believe are the most important considerations regarding quality manuscript reviews, and I hope they will assist those of you who have the privilege of reviewing manuscripts for *The Prairie Naturalist* (TPN) or any other scientific outlet. Without a doubt, a study with a flawed experimental design or inferences based on small sample sizes are the most prevalent causes of concerns with referees (particularly fatally flawed study designs). Additionally, quality of writing and the originality/novelty of work are often sharply criticized by referees. In my capacity as an Editor/Associate Editor/manuscript reviewer, I focus on these three considerations, which I will further elaborate on each (Chamberlain 2008).

Experimental Design.—Does the current description of the study enable you to understand how the study was con-

ducted, what study design was used, and how results logically flow from that design (Chamberlain 2008)? As a reviewer, I pay particular attention to these questions because sufficient detail should be provided to enable readers to exactly replicate the methodology used in the event they choose to conduct similar work. To this end, direct links between field methodology, experimental design, and statistical analyses used during a study should be apparent and transparent (Chamberlain 2008). Referees should be particularly critical of this as they prepare their reviews. By asking yourself questions like "Do the authors clearly describe how their field methodology contributed to study design?" or "Do statistical analyses establish a direct link to elements of research design or study objectives?" should help focus your review on important considerations. If the answer to these questions is "no" or if confusion exists, the manuscript has failed to properly convey the necessary information (Chamberlain 2008). On more than one occasion, I have read comments from referees indicating that they missed information in the text body that could have clarified these links; this should serve as a red flag to you as a referee (Chamberlain 2008). Simply stated, if you think you may have missed this information, more than likely it was not included in the manuscript text or the current presentation needs to be rewritten for clarity (Chamberlain 2008).

Quality of Writing.—As you conduct your review, ask yourself whether the information presented in the manuscript is written in a manner that enables you to understand the key elements needed to determine whether the paper is suitable for publication. Pay particular attention to the justification for conducting the work (which should be clearly described in the Introduction), study objectives, methods (including detailed descriptions of how data was collected), primary results and what they actually mean, how key results relate to previously published literature and the underlying biological question being addressed, and specific implications of the work (Chamberlain 2008). As a referee, you should be able to judge the quality and accuracy of each of these elements. However, if you are unable to appropriately judge any (or some) of these elements because of a lack of clarity in the text, the quality of writing is insufficient (Chamberlain 2008). To improve comprehension, you should request that authors provide clarification.

Originality/Novelty of Work.—A frequent (and relevant) issue that I often address relates directly to this topic and whether manuscripts are of appropriate scope and breadth to warrant consideration for publication in TPN (Chamberlain 2008). In your capacity as a referee, you are being asked to judge whether research in some way improves our understanding of the management/research issue being addressed and whether the contribution is sufficiently unique (Cham-

berlain 2008). Ideally, a manuscript submitted to *TPN* should provide both. That is, the manuscript should improve our understanding of the topic of interest by moving our scientific knowledge base forward, rather than reiterating what we already know. Further, the manuscript should provide a novel or original contribution rather than repeat previous work with similar inferences (Chamberlain 2008). Keep in mind that while a manuscript may be well-written, rigorous in study design, and make inferences based on large sample sizes, it still may fail to provide a novel contribution that will improve our understanding of ecological processes (Chamberlain 2008). In such cases, manuscripts may not be well-suited for *TPN*. As referees for *TPN*, you should be particularly mindful of the relative contribution of the work to our current knowledge base about the topic. Be diligent in your efforts to understand the experimental design and scrutinize the writing to ensure that it is transparent and easily replicated by others (Chamberlain 2008).

As part of the long-term objective to have *TPN* “relisted” by Thomson Reuters Web of Science, ISI Web of Knowledge, and other similar indexing engines, the editorial staff is continuing to work toward this end. Most recently, we are now contracting with a professional publishing company who is assembling and distributing future issues of *TPN*. The formal review of *TPN* by the Web of Science (initiated during summer 2013) will continue until they have received 3 journal issues in a timely manner. Additionally, our Editorial staff continues to work with authors to publish proceedings of the 23rd North American Prairie Conference (NAPC) as a special issue in *TPN*. We will be publishing the special issue during spring 2014, which we hope will expedite the formal review

of *TPN*. We anticipate a decision regarding the listing of *TPN* by the Web of Science during early winter 2014. I will be diligent in providing our membership with regular updates regarding the formal review process.

The *TPN* is fortunate to have an excellent editorial staff, including an outstanding team of Associate Editors and an exceptional Assistant Editor (Troy Grovenburg), whose tireless work keep the journal moving forward in a timely manner. Lastly, I genuinely appreciate you, the reader. During my tenure as Editor-in-Chief, I have confirmed again and again that the readers of *TPN* are a devoted group of professionals. Over the past 4 years, many of you have contacted me to offer support for our efforts to transform the journal, or in other cases to offer ideas for improving *TPN*. It is personally gratifying to interact with natural resource professionals who have such a strong and genuine interest in seeing *TPN* serve their needs. In closing, if you have any questions, comments, or concerns about *TPN*, please feel free to contact me. After all, this is your journal, and I very much appreciate your thoughts about it. Until next time, have a safe winter field season everyone!

—Christopher N. Jacques
Editor-in-Chief

LITERATURE CITED

- Chamberlain, M. J. 2008. Editor’s Message – Providing a Quality Manuscript Review. *Journal of Wildlife Management* 72(8):1661–1662.