

Peering into peer review

We are now publishing details of the review process for published manuscripts.

At the end of 2019, *Nature Ecology & Evolution*, along with seven other Nature Research journals, started offering authors the option of publishing details of the peer review process associated with their articles. An [editorial](#) in *Nature* in February 2020 announced how this scheme works, and it follows on from a successful pilot at *Nature Communications*. We have now published the first few articles that include reviewer reports, author responses and editorial decision letters.

Peer review plays a critical role in regulating the scientific process and can substantially enhance the quality of individual articles. It has also been recognized for many years that there could be value in making this confidential process more transparent, but only in the last few years has more than a small group of pioneering journals started doing this. We are excited to be joining this growing trend in offering our readers detailed insight into the work that went into producing the final published manuscript. Indeed, it is interesting to note that when *Nature Communications* [assessed the first year of their trial](#), ecology and evolution was the subject area in which they saw the highest uptake from authors.

Since 1 December 2019, authors submitting a manuscript to *Nature Ecology & Evolution* have been able to opt in to transparent peer review, and to make a final decision about publishing these details if their paper is accepted. Since that date, all invited reviewers have been informed that their anonymized reports may be published if the authors opt in. It is too early to provide any meaningful information on the rate of uptake from authors: given that most

manuscripts undergo 2–3 rounds of review, we have so far only published 5 studies with transparent peer review, although there are several more nearing publication. However, we have not had any reviewers giving the new scheme as a reason to decline to review. Of course, they may have declined and not told us the reason, and we will monitor overall numbers to try to identify whether transparent peer review may be affecting reviewer acceptances (although the COVID-19 crisis is also currently skewing these numbers).

When authors opt in, we publish a single curated file that contains the reviewer reports, author responses and editorial decision letters from all rounds of review. The file is entitled ‘Peer Review Information’ and can be found with the Supplementary Information files on the article’s HTML page. See [here](#) for the first example we published. We have not, in the interests of transparency, edited out the more mundane information on format and editorial procedures that is necessarily included in decision letters, but hope that readers will not find it difficult to find the information they need. We do have to redact information in a few categories, such as that which would infringe copyright and unpublished data that either authors or reviewers intend for future publication. We also by default redact reviewer names when they have signed their reports, but will ask reviewers if they would prefer that we did not: this allows reviewers to continue to identify themselves to the authors without forcing them to identify themselves more widely. Note that we anticipate very soon formalizing the process for reviewer recognition as [developed by some of our sister titles](#).

Scientific publishing would not be possible without the enormous efforts of peer reviewers. There is a lot of trust and goodwill involved in the system, but it is important that we do as much as possible both to recognize these efforts and to open them up to scrutiny. We hope that these additional steps will provide several benefits. In many cases, readers who wish to engage with an article in a very detailed way may obtain substantial further insights from the review document, complementary to information in other supplementary information, openly deposited data sets, data descriptor articles, preprints, News & Views articles and behind the paper blog posts. For a small number of articles, important points of disagreement in the exchange between authors and reviewers should allow readers to better put the article into context. Access to reviewer reports is also a useful training tool for researchers engaging in their first peer reviewing activity, and the author responses serve a similar purpose for revising submitted manuscripts. Similarly, the peer review document may be a useful addition to journal club discussions.

Hopefully, the transparency will also increase confidence in the integrity of the process and will help identify and address potential sources of unfairness. Finally, in the longer term, historians of science could find these documents a rich source of behind the scenes information. The sadly unlikely prospect of seeing such information for some of the most ground-breaking or controversial articles of the past is, after all, tantalizing. □

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