

◆ Acceptance Address: CSE, Volunteer Editors, and Peer Review

Bruce Dancik

**Editor-in-Chief, NRC Research Press
Director, Devonian Botanic Garden,
and Professor, Department of
Renewable Resources, University of
Alberta**

Little did I imagine when Barbara Drew twisted my arm into joining the then-CBE over 20 years ago that I'd be up here today. I was both pleasantly surprised and somewhat astounded, but really more stunned than anything else, when I found out. As I remarked to Tom Lang, I was glad I was sitting down when I opened his letter informing me of this honor. For it truly is an honor, one that I will never forget.

The Council of Science Editors (and its predecessor the Council of Biology Editors) has been singularly important to me for these 20-odd years. Whether it was in the pages of *Science Editor*, at retreats or workshops, or at CSE annual meetings, here was a place where my concerns as an editor were discussed, debated, and shared. This is in marked contrast with my experience as a scientist, where informal discussions at the academy or at scientific meetings rarely focused on publishing and ethical issues.

Like many of you, I came to editing and publishing with no formal training and had little contact with publishing beyond that as an author or as the referee of an occasional manuscript sent to me for review by a journal. I did have a mentor, Burton Barnes at the University of Michigan, who instilled a sense of responsibility to support journals in one's discipline ("... if you don't support them and they're not there when you want to publish, you only have yourself to blame..."). Anyway, I was in early midcareer (36 or 37 years old) when a phone call came from Claude Bishop inviting me to become editor of the *Canadian Journal of Forest Research (CJFR)*. With a great deal of trepidation (and lots



photo by Tiffany Inbody
Bruce Dancik

of coaxing by Claude), I accepted. I knew virtually nothing about the job and had to learn quickly. With some rapid learning-by-doing and a lot of help from CSE and colleagues I met at meetings, I managed to succeed.

To set the scene, let me tell you a bit about the National Research Council and its Research Press. The NRC is a large, respected, scientific research organization—an agency established by the government of Canada in 1916. It has more than 3400 employees and 1000 visiting researchers in scientific laboratories in several disciplines in several locations across the country. It already was a well-established scientific organization when it started publishing scientific journals in 1929. On a world scale, the NRC Research Press is a small-to-medium-sized, not-for-profit government publisher. It is the largest scientific publisher in Canada. We publish 15 journals and a series of mono-

graphs; we also provide publishing services to some scientific societies and others. Our editors (and the editor-in-chief) are all volunteer editors.

I was fortunate in that I started as editor of *CJFR* when it was a small quarterly, and I joined it just as the discipline of forest research began a bit of a boom, and we started attracting a lot of good manuscripts. The *Journal* grew quickly to become a monthly that became probably the pre-eminent forest-research journal in the world. During that decade, CSE gave me the necessary advice, guidance, support, and commiseration from colleagues so that I could function as an editor. These colleagues were involved with similar challenges or had been through many of the same crises before, and many became valuable friends. Later, CSE helped me to cope with my current position as editor-in-chief of the NRC Press, where I oversee the recruitment of the volunteer editors for all our journals, have helped initiate some new journals and a scientific-monograph program, and am concerned with the peer-review process at the Press. This help has come through these sorts of meetings, retreats, and workshops and most of all by the colleagues and friends I have met here. Through CBE and CSE, I have been fortunate to meet Ed Huth, Bob Day, Marcia Angell, Susan Eastwood, Lew Gidez, Kathy Case, Maria Lebron, Faith McLellan, Annette Flanagan, Cheryl Iverson, Lee Miller, Stephen Lock, Martha Brookes, Martha Tacker, Drummond Rennie, John Bailar, Pat Woolf, Richard Horton, Christy Wright, John Overbeke, Barbara Gastel, Mary Scheetz, Seth Beckerman, Frank Davidoff, Roy Pitkin, Pat Huston, the people on the Style Manual Committee, the faculty and students in the Short Course for Journal Editors, and countless others. Many of you also know the story of my meeting Brenda on the way to a CBE meeting in Orlando. I've had wonderful

CSE Award for Meritorious Achievement

Acceptance Address continued

and stimulating experiences at CBE and CSE meetings.

Now, since I have the floor, I want to comment briefly on a couple of topics in scientific publishing that are near and dear to me.

Volunteer Editors

Hundreds, probably thousands, of scientific societies, nonprofit journals, and others rely on the time, expertise, and devotion of volunteer editors. These volunteers usually are full-time scientists at universities, agencies, and other institutions whose employers let them use some of their work-time to be editors. Over time, however, the employers typically expect these editors to perform all their regular duties with the usual expectations and to somehow complete their journal responsibilities in their “spare time”. (In this regard, I have been fortunate; the University of Alberta has tried to at least partially accommodate the editorial duties of my volunteer positions.)

These editors typically have little or no formal training. They learn on the job and from peers and at places like CSE, but often just from the former, unfortunately. These scientific editors are so wedded to their scientific discipline and its meetings that they often don't have time for organizations like CSE, or they think that their editorial job is a temporary responsibility before they get back 100% to their “real science”. What is remarkable is that they cope as well as they do. A big and continuing challenge for CSE is to reach these editors particularly when they are new to their editorial responsibilities and in most need of advice and this collegial atmosphere. We don't attract enough of them, and virtually all of them would be helped by membership in CSE and association with our colleagues who attend CSE meetings.

The whole peer-review process rarely reflects the value of this volunteer effort. The balance sheet for peer-review costs does not take into account the time and value of not only volunteer editors, but also volunteer referees, volunteer associate editors, and volunteer editorial board members. The same accounting also rarely

takes into consideration the space, furniture, and infrastructure for their editorial offices provided by these volunteers' institutions and employers. If fair market value were paid for all these contributions, the peer-review process would be considerably more expensive than it now appears to be.

Editorial Responsibility

The primary role of scientific editors, of course, is to determine the content of their journals. We often describe editors as gatekeepers or guardians of the scientific merit of their journals. I think we often forget, however, that the editor is trying to find an important balance between authors and the readership. He or she is obliged to serve the readers of the journal, but also to serve the authors of good science. In many ways, the editor is trying to improve communication between author and reader, in addition to providing validation of the science.

There has been a lot of discussion about that process of validation—peer review—and its faults in the last few years. Amidst all the hand-wringing and soul-searching, however, a few editors have reminded us that the comments about democracy (. . . it's a lousy way to run a country and a government, but until a better way can be found, we'll use it . . .) may also apply to peer review. In particular, I think that what is often forgotten in all this are the relative roles and responsibilities of referees and editors. Referees provide advice—sometimes good advice, sometimes bad, sometimes rushed, sometimes biased, sometimes influenced by which side of the bed they got out of—but still just advice. Editors have to make decisions by sifting through that advice of variable quality and trying to find what's good and novel for their journal.

Similarly, I'm amused by the surprise some editors and scientists have shown at the lack of response received when they've tried completely open review (putting a manuscript on the Web for what I call “chat-room review”). What they are forgetting, of course, is that scientists, like many others, are too busy these days. They don't have time to read and comment on

all these preliminary reports. One of the functions of good, peer-reviewed journals is to help readers avoid having to peruse and sort out all the wheat from the chaff. Fortunately, many excellent scientists, who never would have time to provide these chat-room reviews, will find the time to serve as referees for a journal and editor they respect.

This is not to say that we can't improve peer review. Most serious editors will continue to look for better ways of getting unbiased, sound, useful input so that they make the best acceptance decisions for their journals. We also must continue to educate our scientific colleagues and especially students about scientific and publishing ethics and responsible authorship and take steps to encourage the best ethical practices in our journals. I continue to hope we can also make the public gain at least a rudimentary understanding of science, but I'm not sure this is realistic. I keep noting, for example, that airport security staff think that a random search means selecting the first person boarding a plane (or, as happened to me and a colleague at the Los Angeles International Airport the other day, asking which of us wanted to be the subject of a random search)!

That's enough about issues. I now would like to thank all the wonderful associate editors and assistants who made the *Canadian Journal of Forest Research* look so good and let me bask in their reflected glory in the 1980s. And I want to thank everyone at the NRC Press—Iain Taylor, assistant editor-in-chief; the editors of the 15 journals and the monographs; the past and current directors (Barbara Drew, Steve Prudhomme, Joan Hill, and Aldyth Holmes); and all their staff. I've greatly enjoyed working with them over the last couple of decades, and I appreciate their making me look good because of their good work. Thank you, especially, CSE. I'm honored to have been chosen for this award, and I'm still pinching myself, because I can't quite believe it. 🍷