Keeping Those Bugs in Check, or My First Year as Editor of Entomological News: A Personal Perspective

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In November 2003, I became the editor of Entomological News, the oldest bug journal in the United States. At that time, the publication had not been printed for nearly a year, and I was charged with getting it back on track. Looking back after nearly a year and a half as editor, I have had the time to reflect on some of the challenges faced and lessons learned.

How Did It All Get Started?

Early in my scientific career, which began around 1980, I started to develop some views about writing clearly, interestingly, and concisely. On occasion, I daydreamed that maybe one day I would have an editorial post that would complement my main interests in systematics, ecology, and evolution with a “little blue and white entomology journal”. Already simultaneously pursuing a PhD in entomology and an MA in botany at the University of California, Berkeley, I tried looking for opportunities to do editorial work long distance in my native Puerto Rico. Early in the 1990s, I served as reviewer of arachnologic papers for the Caribbean Journal of Science. During the next few years, I reviewed papers submitted to a variety of scientific journals but did not hold positions of greater responsibility. As a result of personal contacts and expression of an interest in editing, my first major break was in 2001 when I became coeditor of an international collaborative book (Jolivet P, Santiago-Blay JA, Schmitt M, editors. New Developments on the Biology of Chrysomelidae. The Hague, the Netherlands: SPB Academic Publishers; 2004. 803 pages).

The availability of my current position came to light one day in the fall of 2003, while I was still serving as coeditor of New Developments. Surfing the Web, I stumbled on an ad for the position of editor of Entomological News, a bimonthly journal with an average worldwide paid circulation of about 560, published by the American Entomological Society (AES) with headquarters at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It was the “little blue and white entomology journal” I had dreamed of editing years earlier. In early November 2003, shortly after interviewing for the position, I began my tenure as editor of Entomological News. Waiting for me were three cardboard boxes full of files containing papers for review, some submitted as early as 2001, a few reference books deemed useful for editors, and the responsibility of trying to get Entomological News to catch up, because it was then four issues behind.

As I was driving back home to Washington, DC, it started to sink in that I had attained one of my professional goals: becoming the editor of a scientific journal. I started thinking about my own goals and hopes for the journal in the weeks and months ahead. I decided to meet with a former long-time editor of the journal, Howard P Boyd, to gain as much expertise and information about it as I could. That meeting turned out to be candid, funny, and full of practical information. Boyd had many stories about the history of the journal and quirks of some of the contributing authors, and he gave me advice, in no uncertain terms, as to potential landmines to avoid. The meeting also gave me a different sense of passing the torch on to the next generation of editors of Entomological News. Later in meetings with the business editor, Faith Kuehn, and the president of AES, Susan Whitney King, we began to coordinate getting Entomological News out of the prolonged resting period or, as entomologists say, diapause.

Mending Fences

Entomological News was at a crossroads: It was almost a year behind and without a printer. In addition, we were getting feedback from concerned subscribers and authors about the journal's future. It was obvious to me that developing a sense of trust by mending fences and working to get caught up ought to go hand and hand. The first order of business was to contact authors whose papers were finally being reviewed. I reassured authors that we intended to resume publication of one of the oldest entomology journals in the United States, which had been going strong and almost uninterruptedly since 1890. Almost without exception, the authors were understanding and gracious. Most of them kept their papers in the queue, giving us the opportunity to proceed. I contacted authors whose papers had been rejected but seemed promising, encouraging them to incorporate the suggested changes and resubmit. Those sincere personal touches appear to have had a powerful effect: most authors, including retired entomologists, have communicated favorable reactions, resubmitted their papers, and submitted new ones. I truly believe we accomplished the most important goal within the first few months: to renew the confidence in Entomological News as a reasonable venue for scholarly scientific papers in entomology in the broad sense.
Getting the First Issue Out
Choosing a printing company proved to be an exciting learning experience. Dover Litho, an experienced family-owned business with an excellent ecologic track record, was selected as our printing company. The owner gave us a minilesson on printing nomenclature and types of paper available, as well as how materials should be chosen to meet our practical and esthetic concerns. We were invited for a tour of the operation, and the staff made us feel as though our concerns about the journal were theirs as well. In addition, we learned a lot about printing that became useful in understanding the entire process from start to finish.

Getting used to the mechanics of the editorial process, streamlining it, and using technology to support our efforts have surely helped the journal come a long way. *Entomological News* went through a sudden—and successful—editorial paradigm transition in its modus operandi. The typewriter was replaced with the computer, handwritten editorial comments to authors and notes to the printer were replaced with e-mail, and papers going to the printer were formatted by me according to the style of the journal. The cyber ether helped us to streamline the process while offering a welcoming atmosphere to all potential contributors. On 9 April 2004, *Entomological News* saw the light of publication (Volume 114, Number 1, January and February 2003) after a hiatus of some 16 months. Although AES council members decided to continue the sequence of uninterrupted volumes, all articles had a footnote indicating the mailing date of the journal (as contrasted with the date printed on the cover of the journal), a practice we intend to continue because it is important for the purposes of zoologic nomenclature.

Lessons Learned
In my first year as editor, I have learned three major lessons.

*Lesson 1: Balance fairness and speed while keeping high standards.* As editor, I have had the pleasure of working with authors and reviewers of numerous countries, cultural backgrounds, and personalities. Perhaps the two most important aspects of my interactions with authors and reviewers are being fair and being expedient with everyone. Because of the almost worldwide availability of e-mail, papers can usually be sent out for review within 24 hours—often within the hour—and authors seem to like that. I have also learned not to deal with some authors who do not seem to want their papers sent out for review. For the first time in my life, I learned the verb “overreviewed.” In such cases, I have kindly, but firmly, told those authors that their papers are going to be reviewed as anyone else’s are. A few authors withdrew their papers, including one who said he would wait to see how our journal would go before considering resubmitting papers to us, but most have seemed to appreciate a fair-handed venue in which to submit their papers. The natural back-and-forth between authors and editors during the prepublication phase should be constructive rather than acrimonious and should lead to an enhanced quality of the contributions and the journal itself.

*Lesson 2: Seek advice pertaining to the legal rules of the road.* Although editors are not lawyers, some points of law do come into play, and we are ultimately responsible for whatever gets published. Some examples that illustrate that point follow.

Early on, I was made aware that publishers headquartered in the United States are prohibited from publishing papers from countries that the US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control has listed as banned because they are under US trade embargoes. With that knowledge, my hopes of extending invitations to authors internationally without geographic restriction went down the drain. In other instances, authors who have used illustrations taken from other publications have had to ensure in writing that all the permits have been garnered. For all critical issues, I have consulted with editorial colleagues in other journals.

*Lesson 3: Develop an editorial philosophy that reflects high standards and realistic long-term goals.* Now that we are caught up with publishing back issues of *Entomological News*, I have had time to reflect on my own editorial philosophy and the broad goals of the journal. Overall, I want *Entomological News* to be an excellent and expedient journal for scholarly entomology papers. Furthermore, I hope to foster a fair and welcoming atmosphere for submitting such contributions. Although we are especially interested in contributions from workers in North America, for years *Entomological News* has increasingly published international contributions, greatly enriching the breadth of our journal. Finally, I have tapped into the collective wisdom of reviewers worldwide to diversify the pool of colleagues available to authors who submit papers to *Entomological News*. That alleviates the reviewing load of a handful of colleagues and enlarges and democratizes the flow of ideas into the field from a wider selection of voices. For the same reasons, I have made our book-review section available to students and those not professionally trained in entomology. Not only are they thrilled by the opportunity of “being published”, but they have invariably produced wonderful literary pieces from different vantage points that I hope will entice readers to check out a new book.

Having concluded my first year as editor, I feel a profound sense of privilege to have worked with so many dedicated scientists from around the world. I am also deeply aware of the many benefits that one receives while serving others. Being editor of *Entomological News* has been an intellectually and emotionally rewarding venture because it has given me the opportunity to help advance the field of entomology.