

## VIEWPOINT

# Could environmental and conservation sciences benefit from an anonymized journal?

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Retributions against environmentalists have been escalating in recent years around the globe. A record number of environmental defenders were murdered in 2021, breaking the record set by the previous year (Global Witness, 2021). Environmental scientists have also faced various legal and professional consequences for publishing data or perspectives contrary to those promoted by governments or industry (Dickman & Danks, 2012; Driscoll et al., 2021; Letnic, 2000). Despite the intensity of threats to environmentalists, and the potential for anonymous publishing to mitigate some of these threats (Calver, 2021; Letnic, 2000; Minerva, 2014), there are still no reputable options for anonymous or pseudonymous publishing in academic journals.

Governments and private industry alike have committed acts of retaliation against environmentalists across the globe. Environmental scientist David Gaveau, for example, had his office raided and was deported from Indonesia after publishing wildfire area values substantially larger than those reported by the government (Rochmyaningsih, 2020). Similarly, in Turkey, scientist Bülent Şık was imprisoned for over a year for independently publishing research, commissioned and then buried by his own government, revealing a link between pollution and cancer in western Turkey (PhysOrg, 2019). Developed countries are certainly not immune either, with Sweden-based scientists threatened with legal action by private corporations over publication of a study revealing a link between tax havens

and environmental exploitation (Galaz et al, 2018; Stockholm University, 2018). Scientists reporting on the impacts of development projects, in particular, are often the focus of attacks and suppression from project proponents in both government and industry (Laurance, 2019).

This lingering threat of retribution also contributes to a climate of fear around publishing critical data. For example, I was recently informed by colleagues from multiple organizations that it would be too risky to add their names to a penned article on how perverse legal, political, and economic structures promote environmentally destructive development. Many recommended I publish anonymously to avoid reprisals from powerful parties.

Similarly, governments and industries around the world routinely suppress statistics on environmental impacts either until they can be released quietly, or sometimes indefinitely (Alvares, 2021; Nature Conservation Council, 2018). Australia provides a poignant example, as government-funded coral bleaching survey results, withheld potentially for political reasons (Cox, 2022), were only officially published after being leaked to the media. Suppression of studies on environmental degradation has numerous impacts, such as hindering our ability to accurately identify and quantify threats to vulnerable species and ecosystems, as well as impacts to global cycles. This suppression also has significant global impacts outside of scientific communities, including consequences for human health posed by pollution or oil spills

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(Brockovich, 2022). Anonymous scientific publishing may facilitate the release of such data, which would otherwise be buried, to scientific communities and the public.

While there has been little support for anonymous publishing in science to date, I believe environmental science would benefit from an anonymized journal for the publication of particularly poignant results. Anonymous publishing in science, however, is a controversial topic, with strong opinions on either side (Neuroskeptic, 2013; Teixeira da Silva, 2017). A common concern raised when discussing anonymous scientific publishing is the credibility of data and perspectives published from behind a mask. By using anonymous publishing an individual or group may, for example, fabricate data to support vested interests or discredit competitors (Neuroskeptic, 2014). In this instance, Wikileaks may provide a model example of an anonymized journal. In addition to its encrypted drop-box, Wikileaks employs various highly sophisticated steps to verify the source and accuracy of leaked documents. Integration of such a system into a particularly rigorous peer-review should improve confidence in the veracity of publications. Additionally, an increased focus on detailed methods reporting and data transparency would likely improve confidence in publication integrity.

Another step to ease concerns surrounding data integrity could be to require identification at the point of submission and anonymize throughout the review and publication process. Attaching an identity at submission would discourage misappropriation of anonymity and ensure articles meet the same quality standards as those submitted to any other journal. This method would also allow scientists to maintain a verified record of anonymous publications for future use in success metrics if it becomes viable to do so. However, this method may require more complex security infrastructure and legal protections.

Although Wikileaks already publishes environmental data to some extent, there is little integration of this into the broader scientific community. Similarly, while the information may enter the public domain, named academic publications using these data may still attract retaliation (i.e., Galaz et al., 2018). While it may be possible for multiple journals to provide an anonymous publication format, the necessity and complexity of robust cybersecurity infrastructure and legal protections might mean it is more feasible to establish a dedicated anonymous journal. Centralization of anonymous publishing would also mean people 'know what they are getting' when engaging with said journal, as any anonymous publishing must be held to the highest possible standard to prevent misuse.

Given the intensity of retributions against environmentalists globally, and the potential for anonymous publishing to mitigate some of these risks, I believe there would

be strong support for an environmental-science-specific anonymous journal.

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