

# On Conflict and Conflict of Interest



Scientific and professional journals stake their reputation on the quality and objectivity of their publishing processes. Content from reputable journals enjoys wide acceptance and high credence because their published research is considered unbiased and free from undue influence. While the scientific publishing process is far from perfect (as evidenced by the recent spate of high-profile retractions in many journals and disciplines), editors and publishers institute rules and procedures to safeguard the integrity of the publishing process to ensure the quality, originality, and ownership of published material.

One important tool for maintaining objectivity in the publishing process is requiring authors to disclose potential conflicts of interest (also called competing interests) at the time of article submission. While this is standard practice for scholarly publishing, what constitutes a conflict of interest can sometimes be difficult to define in the context of journals published by a professional organization like the Society for Range Management (SRM) where many of the field's scientists and practitioners also participate directly or indirectly in management of their study systems. Our goals with this editorial are to clarify the definition and types of conflict of interest in research and publishing, illustrate some potential conflicts with examples, and discuss the implications of both disclosed and undisclosed conflicts of interest for publishing in *Rangelands* and *Rangeland Ecology & Management*.

Elsevier, the publisher of *Rangelands* and *Rangeland Ecology & Management*, defines a conflict of interest as, "... a set of conditions in which professional judgment concerning a primary interest, such as the validity of research, may be influenced by a secondary interest, such as financial gain"<sup>1</sup>. Conflicts of interest in publishing occur when an author, reviewer, or editor has an interest in the outcome of research (including its publication) that may influence or compromise the integrity of their research or work<sup>2,3</sup>.

While authors may be generally familiar with financial or editorial conflicts, the competing interests that create conflicts can take many forms. Conflicts of interest can be generally classified into three types<sup>4</sup>:

- **Financial conflicts** arise in situations where perceived or actual competition exists between personal or institutional financial gain and the accuracy, objectivity, efficiency, or

honesty of their work<sup>4</sup>. Financial conflicts in publishing are important to disclose because they can result in pressure to not report negative research results, selectively present data to improve results, or even falsify data (an ethical violation) to support a funder's position. Declaration of funding sources for research is one mechanism for managing financial conflicts of interest.

- **Conflicts of commitment** arise from competing demands placed on someone's time or loyalties and occur when external activities influence an individual's responsibilities or objectivity<sup>4</sup>. Many conflicts in publishing are conflicts of commitment. For example, a journal editor participating in the review and decision of a manuscript they authored is a conflict of commitment. Publishing research results from a study area for which the authors have a vested interest in its management is also a conflict of commitment, regardless of financial interests.
- **Personal and intellectual conflicts** occur when personal beliefs or opinions could influence conducting, reviewing, and reporting research. In this case, the presumed interest in seeing a person or work succeed or fail could conflict with the responsibility to evaluate works based on available evidence<sup>4</sup>. Providing peer review for an author or study the reviewer knows well (e.g., works closely with, shares grant funding, past advisor or student) constitutes a personal conflict of interest. Intellectual conflicts can arise from authors' or reviewers' desire to see their research programs or theories succeed and can lead to biased interpretation of results or biased reviews. Because personal and intellectual conflicts in publishing can be difficult to identify, it is paramount that authors and reviewers self-identify and disclose them.

It is important to clarify that a conflict of interest is not intrinsically bad and does not indicate impropriety on the part of the authors – only that the potential for bias or undue influence exists and should be mitigated in the publication process. The goal is to minimize situations that provide, or may appear to provide, opportunity for bias on the part of authors, reviewers, or editors. Thus, "the conflict lies in the situation, not in any behavior or lack of behavior of the individual."<sup>4</sup> Because conflicts of interest and personal biases within a close-knit society like the SRM are often inescapable, it is important to acknowledge and describe them so they can be accounted for in the publication process. The example above of authors publishing about lands for which they have a management interest is not a rare phenomenon in SRM journals. While it is a potential conflict of interest and should be disclosed, it should not discourage authors involved in rangeland management from submitting high quality research to SRM journals.

Upon submission of a manuscript to *Rangelands* or *Rangeland Ecology & Management*, authors are required to make a declaration of interest (also called a disclosure statement). This is a statement from the authors that there is no interest or belief that could affect their objectivity, or if there is, a description of the nature of that potential conflict<sup>1</sup>. Disclosure of potential conflicts does not preclude publication of a submission but allows the editors to take steps to alleviate a conflict's potential effects. Similarly, conflicts of interest on the part of reviewers should be disclosed to the editor prior to accepting an invitation to review for either *Rangelands* or *Rangeland Ecology & Management*. Reviewer conflicts of interest may not preclude providing a review, but it is best to disclose the details of the conflict beforehand and leave it to the discretion of the editor to determine if the conflict can be managed.

Undisclosed conflicts of interest are a serious matter and consequences for publication are at the discretion of the journal's editor. For authors, discovery of an undisclosed conflict of interest prior to publication is grounds for immediate rejection of a manuscript. If a conflict of interest is discovered after publication, a corrigendum may be issued to disclose the conflict if it was not deemed to influence the integrity of the work or its publication. If a post-publication undisclosed conflict is deemed to have compromised the quality of the research or the publication process, the article may be retracted.

Authors to SRM journals are encouraged to read Elsevier's FAQ sheet on ethics in publishing for more information. Specific questions regarding potential conflicts of interest or personal bias for submissions or peer review should be directed to the journal's editor. Both *Rangeland Ecology & Management* and *Rangelands* are striving to attract and publish the highest quality manuscripts possible. Through the combined efforts of authors, reviewers, and editors in

minimizing the potential effects of conflicts of interest, we can continue to lead in the publication of unbiased data and manuscripts that move our profession into the future.

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