

Writing for conservation—a skill for life

STUART PATERSON and MARTIN FISHER

Articles published in the peer-reviewed conservation literature are not an unbiased representation of geographies, ecosystems or species, or even of authorship. Studies of threats to species have focused predominantly on mammals and birds in Europe, Oceania and North America (Velasco et al., 2015); amongst top-publishing authors, women and countries in the Global South are notably underrepresented (Maas et al., 2021; James et al., 2022); comparatively less research is undertaken in the most biodiverse countries (Wilson et al., 2016); and although conservation research output in some areas of the Global South is increasing, it remains dominated by non-national scientists (Wilson et al., 2016; Pototsky & Cresswell, 2021). Until recently, one aspect of this imbalance was the limited access in poorer countries and the Global South to the relevant literature, but this has improved following the work of the Research4Life partnership, which provides online access to peer-reviewed content for institutions in lower-income countries, and the move of some journals—including *Oryx* (Fisher, 2020)—to open access.

But universal access to the peer-reviewed literature for conservationists as authors remains problematic. An earlier editorial in this journal noted that ‘... researchers and practitioners working in some of the places most requiring conservation attention are still struggling to reach an international audience with their writing. [We] need a literature for all conservationists, everywhere, written, read and utilized by researchers and practitioners wherever they may [be].’ (Fisher, 2015, p. 2). The need to scale up capacity development in conservation strategically—including for individuals as authors, leaders and researchers—is now recognized (O’Connell et al., 2019; O’Connell & Carter, 2022). This was the theme of the September 2022 issue of *Oryx*, in which 14 teams of authors examined a range of issues, including resilience strategies (Loffeld et al., 2022) and training evaluation (Abu-Bakarr et al., 2022; Gerrie et al., 2022). Building on this by addressing support for authors, this issue of *Oryx* showcases the work of 10 teams of conservationists who have two things in common: at least one member of each team is an alumnus of the Conservation Leadership Programme (CLP) and has also attended a Writing for Conservation workshop offered jointly by CLP and the *Oryx* editorial office.

Over 37 years, CLP has evolved into a partnership that focuses on enhancing the capacity of individuals from predominantly low- and middle-income countries, taking advantage of the ripple effect that means the impacts of capacity support are felt more broadly amongst organizations and communities (Porzecanski et al., 2022). In 2020, CLP celebrated the awarding of a cumulative total of USD 10 million of project funding since 1985 (Tointon, 2020). The Programme’s definition of leadership emphasizes the power of a change-maker who, regardless of their professional stature or position, has the ability to drive transformation in a situation that is having a negative impact, directly or indirectly, on biodiversity (Webb et al., 2022). Expertise from within the three CLP partners—Birdlife International, Fauna & Flora International and the Wildlife Conservation Society—along with input from grantees across continents and generations, has honed the programme into one that strives to understand the complexities of conservation challenges. The Conservation Leadership Programme awards funding that enables early-career conservationists to undertake experiential learning and, additionally, offers training to enhance skills, paid internships, opportunities for innovative practice and learning (O’Connell & Carter, 2022), and an active network that facilitates solidarity and connectivity, and also supports individual resilience (Loffeld et al., 2022).

Writing skills are often taken for granted, as something an individual develops by trial, error and personal endeavour. The Conservation Leadership Programme and *Oryx* editorial office recognize, however, that support for these skills is a vital aspect of professional development for aspiring authors. Guided by expertise from *Oryx*, in-country trainers and workshop peers, the Writing for Conservation workshops guide each participant on a specific writing project, with the final product being a manuscript intended for submission to a peer-reviewed journal.

Although other channels of communication may be more accessible, publication in the peer-reviewed literature remains the pre-eminent way for conservationists to submit the findings of their research and conservation efforts to the scrutiny of their peers. Beyond the satisfaction of crafting a well-structured article, there are other good reasons for publishing in the peer-reviewed literature: publication provides access to the author’s methods, data and interpretation, confers credibility and career enhancement, can be used to help raise additional funds for conservation projects, and may even be a condition of funding.

Since the Writing for Conservation course began in 2008, 10 workshops have been delivered to 143 researchers and

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conservation practitioners (64 women and 79 men) from 30 countries. Based on a survey of participants in 2021, skills developed at the workshop have played a part in the publication of c. 300 articles. For the first time, this issue of *Oryx* brings together the written work of CLP and Writing for Conservation alumni. The 10 articles are illustrative of the broad range of subjects that have attracted the critical attention of workshop participants, from species (titi monkeys: Costa-Araújo et al., 2022; Silva et al., 2022; sperm whales: Avila et al., 2022; frogs: Barata et al., 2022; tigers: Yadav et al., 2022), to methods (arboreal camera trapping: Kaizer et al., 2022; using natural history collections to examine species richness: Aninta et al., 2022), the influence of rural–urban mobility on consumption of wild meat (Torres et al., 2022) and the response of mammals to tourism (Barcelos et al., 2022).

Our personal experience suggests there is a high demand for writing courses, and other organizations and networks now also offer resources and training for writing (e.g. AuthorAID, Nature Masterclasses, Tropical Biology Association). As the Writing for Conservation workshops can support only a limited number of aspiring authors each year, the *Oryx* editorial team has developed a freely available *Writing for Conservation* guide (Fisher, 2019). In addition to advice on writing, it contains guidance on designing and drafting publication-quality figures and managing bibliographies. We hope that all authors, regardless of their target publication, may find this resource useful. Writing is a skill for life, and a well-written article both supports decisions affecting biodiversity and contributes towards personal and professional development.

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