



# How not to influence ecology: three things we have learned at Oikos

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Here at OIKOS, we receive around five or six proposals for a Forum article every week. The Forum is a place where ecological ideas can be kicked around and examined from a different angle. Our hope is that some will provide a high level of synthesis in the field of ecology. Some of the best papers that we've had the privilege to handle as an editor have been Forum papers and we believe that the Forum plays a very important role in OIKOS, and a role in the field of ecology more generally. For that reason, we love the chance to handle great Forum papers. We really dislike the other part of our job: rejecting most of the Forum proposals we get each week. Here, we thought we should provide some insights into why most proposals get rejected.

## Necessity

While we get Forum pieces on many, many topics, a single feature unites the best ones: the author felt compelled to write it. The most effective Forum pieces are those that the author felt just had to be written, that the field was limping along under a misguided principle, that key principles were misunderstood, or despite what the field thought it knew, it actually didn't. Those proposals where the author fiercely believes that ecology won't be as effective as it could be without the Forum paper are the ones that are, in my view, the best. We remember one proposal in particular that basically said, "I really didn't want to write this thing but the field keeps messing this thing up so I had no choice". The resulting article was an excellent contribution that changed the field for the better. In contrast, many other proposals, while they have something to say, are basically tracking along with the field and it is unclear that the field actually needs a Forum piece in order to move forward. One issue here is the pressure for graduate students to accumulate papers as quickly as possible, which leads to the submission of thesis summaries as Forum proposals. In our experience at OIKOS, many of these proposals are adept summaries of the field, but generally are not suitable as Forum pieces as they rarely provide synthesis.

## Telling rather than showing

We get many, many submissions proposing a new framework/model system/approach where the purpose of the Forum article would be to draw attention to a particular thing that the author believes is valuable. We have published such papers over the years and they almost universally fail to have much influence on the field. We suspect that the reason for lack of traction: there are lots of approaches/frameworks/model systems out there, an overwhelming number actually. In response to this overwhelming number, most researchers use approaches or model systems or frameworks that have been shown to work very well. A model system becomes a model system because some brave soul shows the world the power of such a system through excellent empiricism. An approach is taken up more widely when researchers show that it allows unprecedented access to a particular problem via a series of experiments. You may feel that your particular approach is superior, or that your framework is the absolute best for tackling a problem, you may also be right but scientists are rather conservative. Scientists will not take something up just because you tell them it is the right thing to do; instead you have to show them, through your own work. One paper (however good) is unlikely to change a field's whole approach to a problem, so you have to be patient. Through repeated demonstration in your own empiricism, show that your framework (or approach, or model system) is actually best. The uptake of a new approach takes time, it is idiosyncratic, probably biased towards established academics, and unfortunately, probably biased geographically (we are guessing here but we suspect that if someone utilises a new method in California, it is more likely to catch on than if the same method was discovered in Peru). So we see the appeal of writing a Forum piece to catalyse the uptake of some great new thing. The problem is, we rarely see such an approach succeed. At the very least, ecologists are likely to be wary of a new thing until they see the proponents of the thing successfully tackle a range of problems themselves. So, trust that science is an (imperfect) meritocracy, your great

ideas will shine through and be taken up by the field if you persist with them. Overall, we think this issue can be best summed up with a (paraphrased) Twain quote:

*“Don’t say the person screamed. Bring them on and let them scream.”*

Don’t tell us your untested approach is superior, show us through empiricism.

### **They said something mean about my field or paper**

As a scientist it is infuriating when someone else misrepresents one’s work. It can also be very confronting to have key premises of a field challenged, or dismissed. We receive many Forum proposals that seek to respond to such challenges or attacks. We wrote about this problem around four years ago on the OIKOS blog and the issue has not gone away. We do not publish such exchanges in OIKOS as we have not seen much evidence that they are productive. We recognise this will be exasperating for many given that we occasionally

publish heretical Forum pieces and then do not provide the opportunity for others to respond in kind. We note that no one has managed to obliterate a field via a Forum article so far and we doubt that they ever will. So, if you truly disagree with a Forum article, show through empiricism that it is incorrect. Hold your fire, instead use empiricism to make your point.

These three suggestions will seem opaque to some, offensive to others, and obvious to most. Nevertheless, we suspect that editors for other journals will recognise some of these same issues, and may agree (we would love to hear from them either way). Our hope in writing this editorial is that authors avoid wasting their time with doomed proposals. Our key suggestion is for authors to ask themselves, “How would I react to my proposed Forum piece if it were not written by me? Would I change the way I thought about, or did ecology?” If the answer is yes, then go ahead. We look forward to reading it.

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