

Dear Editors:

Perhaps it is the combination of inexperience among members of the scientific community (Alcala AC. Biodiversity research in the Philippines from 1998-2003. *ASEAN Biodiversity* 2004; 4: 26-31) and the challenges faced by libraries (Roman ER. Academic publishing in the 21st century. In *The University of the Philippines Forum* vol 8 2007; <http://www.up.edu.ph/upforum.php?issue=20&i=156>) that leads to excessive focus on whether journals are “international” or “ISI-indexed” in discussions concerning where to publish. It is time for more nuanced discussion concerning journals and the publishing of scientific papers.

It would be both false and counterproductive to generalize that all papers published in “local journals” are of low quality. The ill repute of journals is earned as a result of low standards for acceptance, leading to the publication of papers that would not be considered publishable elsewhere. It is equal folly to generalize that all papers published in ISI-indexed journals are of high quality. For example, some fisheries ecologists are periodically outraged when articles in their field that they consider flawed are published by *Science* or *Nature*. A possible explanation offered is that the editors of these high impact journals are unable to identify the best referees in this area. On the other hand, a specialist journal, the *Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences (CJFAS)*, is said to publish some of the best papers in fisheries ecology and management. That this is a Canadian journal raises the issue of how to distinguish between “local” and “international” journals. Would it make sense to consider *Science* and *Nature* international and *CJFAS* local? Because, in fact, *CJFAS* is widely known to be an international journal, it is useful to ask what makes it so. The answer seems to be that because it is run by competent editors who implement a rigorous process of peer-review, the journal publishes papers considered by scientists in this field to be of value. Consequently, articles are read and cited, and the journal receives submissions from scientists all over the world. On the other hand, consider *Comparative Biochemistry and Physiology (CBP)*, a journal in my discipline that has been ISI-indexed and acknowledged to be “international” for decades. Up to about the mid-1990s, it published papers without adequate peer-review. Thus, despite being ISI-indexed and international in stature, it became known as a repository for junk that was regarded as unpublishable elsewhere. This does not mean that every single

paper published in *CBP* before the mid-1990s was junk. However, having earned such a reputation, it became a magnet for more and more junk. This situation persisted until it was taken over by new editors who swore either to save the journal from its disreputable status or, if unsuccessful, to end its life. Now *CBP* is a respectable journal with a steadily rising impact factor, reflecting the publication of articles that originate, and are read, valued and cited internationally. However, if one searches for international, ISI-indexed journals in which to publish one’s junk, there are still many to be found. Thus, becoming ISI-indexed, by itself, is not much of an accomplishment for a journal.

There are other reasons for a more nuanced discussion of these issues. Numerology or “bean-counting” is a useful exercise, but a highly limited one. Funding agencies, university administrators, tenure review and promotion committees all over the world are often rightly accused of excessive reliance on numerology. It is often said that counting is the lazy, incompetent or ignorant administrator’s (or committee’s) substitute for the proper evaluation of quality. There are scientists who take advantage of the fondness for numerology by churning out large numbers of mediocre papers. Thus, a consensus has emerged that both quantitative measures as well as qualitative assessments should be used, and that these should be evaluated *intelligently*. Inability to do the latter is not an uncommon institutional trait.

Motivated by nationalism and the desire to contribute to the advancement of Philippine science, G.B. Calleja, a distinguished Filipino microbial physiologist, started *KALIKASAN, the Philippine Journal of Biology* in the early 1970s. It was with great pride that I volunteered my services as an editorial assistant to *KALIKASAN* during this period. Although some good papers were published while the journal existed, it must be acknowledged now (as it was then by the Editor) that the general quality of the articles published was a reflection of the quality of the science being done in the country at the time. “Wretched” was the word used by its Editor to describe the state of Philippine science in the early 1970s, so wretched that a newly-arrived marine biologist from Scripps refused to buy a *KALIKASAN* subscription from me for the price of 15 pesos a year. A lesson learned from this is that it takes more than a competent, nationalistic editor for a scientific journal to succeed. The other required ingredient is a community capable of producing good papers at a rate sufficient to sustain the journal. But in the biological sciences alone, there are numerous Philippine journals. The University of the Philippines campuses at Diliman, Los Banos and the Visayas have their own sets of specialty and interdisciplinary scientific journals. It is a useful exercise to consider how many of these currently suffer from the same problems that plagued *KALIKASAN* until its demise in the early 1980s.

A journal’s good name is earned on the basis of the quality

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of the papers it publishes, and is not conferred by labels such as “ISI-indexed” or “international”. It is not the label “local” that condemns journals to ill repute. Rather, ill repute is earned, and it can be earned despite websites stating that journals are “peer-reviewed”. If a community fills a “local journal” with good papers and does so with consistency, then its articles shall be read and cited - if they are accessible - by scientists worldwide. Such a journal is then regarded as “international”, not by declaration, but by consensus. Perhaps, more importantly, such a journal can provide both example and inspiration to the local community and to future generations of scientists.

The fate of Philippine science ultimately rests in the hands of the Filipino scientific community whose members must decide whether (and how) to support new journals with great aspirations, as well as what to do with those that barely cling to life or may do more harm than good. It is beneficial to understand issues surrounding the birth, life, death and salvation of scientific journals.

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