

Editorial

Tropical ecosystems are today changing at an unprecedented rate. Of course change is of the very essence of ecosystems, and ecologists must remain continually aware that what they are currently studying is but one glimpse of the continually varying, kaleidoscopic pattern of life. Throughout the existence of humankind, tropical regions have periodically undergone profound changes wrought by the great Pleistocene ice-ages. Yet within the lifetime of the average person in tropical regions today, who is no more than 20 years old, changes almost as profound have occurred, consequent this time largely upon the increasing numbers, expectations and manipulative capacities of a single species - ourselves.

We now, in the late twentieth century, have in a very real sense dominion over this planet, the power to profoundly alter its life-support systems, the power even to destroy them. Therefore it is incumbent upon us, if only for the wellbeing of this and future generations of our own species, that the modifications which we make to our habitat are based upon a sound knowledge of their likely consequences. Clearly, an understanding of ecological principles must be an integral part of any development planning. Yet the study of tropical ecosystems cannot be perceived solely in terms of economic wellbeing. For we have here some of the most remarkable, most diverse and most beautiful aspects of life on Earth; and the study of these forms and their interrelationships is clearly in itself a most worthy pursuit.

In the past 20 years we have seen a welcome upsurge of interest in tropical ecosystems. This is epitomized by the International Union of Biological Sciences' (IUBS) declaration in 1983 of 'The Decade of the Tropics'. Such declarations are easy to make but difficult to flesh out with practical achievements. An appropriate response was considered by the International Association for Ecology (INTECOL - the General Ecology Section of the IUBS), and the Secretary-General (Dr Frank Golley of the University of Georgia) and the Chairman of INTECOL's Tropical Ecology Working Group (Professore José Furtado of the Commonwealth Secretariat) recommended the launching of a new journal to help disseminate the results of the increasing volume of research in tropical ecology.

Some may groan at the thought of yet another new journal, but I believe that the *Journal of Tropical Ecology* has a role and aims that cannot readily be fulfilled by any other publication. *Biotropica*, a journal I admire, perhaps

comes closest to what I hope the *JTE* will become. But *Biotropica* alone cannot now cope with the demands made upon it. And here I would like to welcome the existence of another publication, *Wallaceana*, 'a global newsletter for tropical ecology' published in Malaysia (edited by Dr A. Sasekumar, Department of Zoology, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur). This nicely complements the *JTE*, and perhaps the journal and the newsletter may eventually form the nucleus of a new grouping for tropical ecologists.

A journal may fulfil two roles, educative and archival. Certain major ecological journals today are perhaps rather indigestible for young tropical ecologists due both to their format and to the preponderance of temperate studies. And such journals, because of the sheer volume of manuscripts submitted, are often unable to publish papers which are largely descriptive; yet tropical ecosystems, so little studied and so rapidly changing, urgently require description. The *JTE* will publish papers devoted to the results of original research, either experimental or descriptive, or those which form significant reviews. Studies on both 'pure' and 'applied' aspects of ecology will be equally welcome. The one sort of paper which is unsuitable is that which uses data from tropical regions solely to discuss theoretical issues. Thus we hope that the *JTE* will not only act as a valued means of communication between established ecologists, but will, by the breadth and quality of its papers, its format and price, stimulate the research activities of young ecologists in tropical nations.

One problem that has considerably exercised us is that of language of publication. Initially I was in favour of allowing three languages but was persuaded, and not by people from English-speaking nations, that publication solely in English would be advantageous (although Abstracts in other languages are welcome). This is for two reasons: firstly, English is increasingly the language of international scientific communication, and this trend is likely to continue; secondly, the use of a single language facilitates the maintenance of editorial standards, a vital factor if a journal is to speak with a distinctive voice. Our international nature should be assured by the Editorial Board which is broadly representative of ecologists undertaking tropical studies. Publication by Cambridge University Press, a widely respected non-profit-making publisher, in conjunction with the ICSU Press, the publishing house for the International Council of Scientific Unions, should ensure dissemination at a reasonable price throughout the world.

We realise that the policy of English-language publication will create problems for certain authors. But to encourage a truly international input, the editors are willing to put much effort into helping such authors improve their presentation. Although I personally have distinctive views about what constitutes 'good English', I hope that editorial interference will not entirely mask the personalities of authors. Within reason, distinctive writing styles (although never verbosity) should make the journal more attractive to read. And I see no reason why the presentation of science in a serious journal should always be devoid of personal opinion. Indeed, by the very way we choose to spend our

scientific lives (even choosing to edit journals) we are expressing an opinion, and I do not see why, on occasion, such opinions should not be overtly stated.

I regret that difficulties in launching the *JTE* have delayed the publication of the various parts of Volume 1. But I remain confident that the journal will shortly be able to publish work promptly and attractively and disseminate it effectively to an international audience. Now it is up to you to provide us with papers which will truly advance our knowledge of and interest in tropical ecosystems, and will thus assist us to conserve much that we know is of unsurpassed value and beauty.

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