

Shifts to open access with high article processing charges hinder research equity and careers

1 | INTRODUCTION

We, as Associate Editors (AEs) for the *Journal of Biogeography*, have serious concerns about the widespread shifts by John Wiley & Sons Ltd (Wiley) and other academic publishers to full Open Access (OA), which appears to be imminent for journals in the Wiley portfolio (Rieseberg et al., 2023) and has been discussed as a possibility for the *Journal of Biogeography* itself. We commend the philosophy of OA—to make research freely available online, but for many journals that shift to full OA, article publication is accompanied by expensive article processing charges (APCs) payable by the authors (see Laakso et al., 2011; Tennant et al., 2016). This creates a financial burden that falls heaviest on early career scientists and scientists from low- to middle-income countries, erecting barriers to equity in publishing. The typical APC fees for OA range from 2000 to 3500 USD but **can even surpass 11,000 USD**, while the *Journal of Biogeography* APC is currently 4800 USD per article. A shift from subscription-based to full OA-based business models with APCs also clearly shifts the economic incentives for journals away from quality and toward quantity. High-throughput and high-output publishing models in academia severely risk lowering research standards and jeopardise the reputation of journals that adopt this practice.

As a way of signalling the depth of our concerns, 85% of the AEs of the *Journal of Biogeography* recently carried out a work stoppage, during which we refused to handle any new manuscript submissions. We view this as a temporary measure, as a way of encouraging further dialogue between Wiley, the publisher of the *Journal of Biogeography*, and the chief editorial team charged with ensuring journal quality. We limited the work stoppage to the handling of new manuscripts so that this action would not impede our colleagues with submitted manuscripts. Our major concerns fall into four areas:

1. Full OA model: We do not support publisher business models that have exorbitant APC charges for OA (e.g., on the order of several thousand USD) that are aligned to produce excessive profit margins for the publishers. This publishing model severely hampers the research visibility of early career researchers and those in countries with low-to-middle economies who cannot afford OA fees and therefore publish in less visible outlets. At the same time, this system promotes the visibility of those researchers with ample funds and allows unfair free access to their content. OA combined with high APCs creates a pay-to-play

system where those that have funds have research that is likely to be more visible and more cited. See the next sections for further discussion of this topic from the perspectives of researchers in the Global South and early career stages.

2. Automatic referral of rejected manuscripts to other journals from the same publisher: We are firmly against this option because it influences both author choice and editorial discretion. Authors provide their content for free to the publishers, and therefore the choice is entirely theirs as to which outlet they prefer for their work. As editors, we are often able to suggest more appropriate journal outlets for particular manuscripts, and these outlets may or may not be in the same family of journals. Our service is given to the field of biogeography, and not to the publisher itself.
3. Increases in the number of articles to be published: A shift to OA, when conducted by for-profit journal publishers, naturally leads to demands for increases in article volume, because journal revenue has become scaled to number of papers, not to annual subscription. Any such increase in volume comes at the expense of AE's time spent processing additional outputs (if the number of submissions increase) and with a potential negative impact on real or perceived article quality (if the thresholds to publication diminish). As AEs, we work gratis – for the good of the community. We dedicate our time to editing as a professional service for our colleagues and to facilitate the distribution of high-quality research, not to maximise profit for publishers.
4. Compensation models for reviewers and AEs: There has always been an uneasy tension in scientific publishing between the imperatives of for-profit publishing (in which maximising growth revenue is primary) and for-service peer reviewing and editing (in which ensuring high-quality published scientific literature is primary). If the business model of for-profit journals is being fundamentally redesigned (as represented by the proposed shift to OA with high APCs), then a fundamental rethink to the incentive model for editors and reviewers is also needed.

2 | A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Researchers in low-to-middle income (LMI) countries (e.g., in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, parts of Asia and Oceania)—collectively identified as the 'Global South' or 'GS' (Dados & Connell, 2012) face many systematic, logistical and economic

challenges to achieve academic productivity (e.g. as may be measured by h-index, # citations, research grants awarded) not experienced by counterparts from high-income countries (e.g., in Western, Central and Northern Europe, North America, Australia, among others). GS researchers have limited access to basic infrastructure, financial resources, and new technologies as well as fewer opportunities for upskilling (Guedes et al., 2023; Reidpath & Allotey, 2019). This situation has created a well-known disparity in academic productivity (Beheregaray, 2008; Gonzalez-Brambila et al., 2016) and uptake of content produced by GS researchers (Gomez et al., 2022; Lund, 2019). This simultaneously favours researchers in more developed countries and increases opportunities for better-resourced researchers to fill research gaps and gain prominence in scientific fields (Demeter, 2019; Gonzalez-Brambila et al., 2016; Odeny & Bosurgi, 2022), particularly in biodiverse regions (Wilson et al., 2016). Already struggling GS researchers now face an additional challenge—the widespread adoption of OA publishing with mandatory and unaffordable APCs. Originally a well-intentioned solution for allowing research to be visible outside paywalls (Laakso et al., 2011; Willinsky, 2006), OA has been co-opted by many journals into a problematic pay-to-publish business model, primarily by for-profit publishing houses (Tennant et al., 2016). Some academic institutions now require their researchers to only, or primarily, e.g. [publish under the OA model](#).

The full OA model is problematic for most researchers from GS countries because they simply lack the financial resources to cover high APCs (Kwon, 2022). GS countries tend to contribute only 1%–2% toward the total annual global research investment, while high-income countries contribute proportionally much more (Gonzalez-Brambila et al., 2016). Such small investment is compounded by a significant purchase-power disparity for GS researchers because APCs are charged in GBP, EUR or USD, and currencies from LMI economies depreciate against stronger currencies (Agénor & Montiel, 2015). The APC fee for a single article can be equivalent to *several months* of basic salary for researchers in GS countries (Dawson et al., 2023; Mekonnen et al., 2021). The financial imbalance produces a lower proportion of OA publications by GS-based researchers because many authors opt out of publishing in OA journals (Kwon, 2022; Smith et al., 2022), particularly in biogeographic fields (Edwards et al., 2022).

The knock-on effect is that GS-based researchers have lower visibility and potentially fewer citations than their counterparts based in high-income countries, which leads to a disparity in research profiles (Gomez et al., 2022). Researchers from many fields have spoken out, demanding greater diversity in authorship (Nuñez et al., 2021; Odeny & Bosurgi, 2022; Raja et al., 2022) brought about by fundamental changes to the OA model to level the playing field. Without a radical shift in the OA business model, a cadre of researchers will increasingly be marginalised, equating to systemic epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Grasswick, 2017; Pitts, 2017) by excluding GS perspectives and approaches that would otherwise advance science (Thorp, 2023). This effect is particularly poignant for biogeographic research because most of the world's remaining biodiversity is

situated in GS countries, and hence contributions from the GS are of special importance to combat the ongoing global biodiversity crisis.

Although most academic publishers offer APC fee waivers to some GS-based authors, the eligibility list is short and based on the per capita GDP of the researchers' country. This typically provides some opportunity for researchers in low-income countries, but those from middle-income countries (MIC) often fall through the cracks. Some publishers offer *discounts* to MIC researchers, but these discounts are insufficient to address the financial disparity. Moreover, applications for discounts are sometimes not granted depending on e.g. [the combination of authors on the article](#). On the surface, OA publishers appear to be addressing inequality, but the number of genuine waivers granted is few relative to the need (Kowaltowski et al., 2023). The reality is that MIC is fraught with income and [wealth inequality](#), and by basing waivers on simple measures, such as per capita GDP, most GS researchers do not qualify. We therefore strongly advocate that the criteria for APC waivers and substantial discounts are based on more nuanced metrics such as wealth distribution, purchasing power (e.g., Gini-Index, PPP, CPI, among others), and percentage of GDP invested in science and technology. The signing of reasonable transformative agreements with GS countries that cover an array of research institutions must advance, as the contributions of GS researchers are being excluded from the most visible global scientific literature. True transformation will dismantle the barriers set up by APCs and be measured not in company profits but in bringing equity to OA academic publishing.

3 | A PERSPECTIVE FROM EARLY CAREER RESEARCHERS

Early career researchers (ECRs), defined here as any scientist within 10 years of PhD completion (Christian et al., 2021), are at the forefront of bringing new insights into the field of biogeography and thus play a critical role in advancing the discipline. For decades, *Journal of Biogeography* has served as a major source of research inspiration for ECRs, many of whom published their first papers in the journal and continue to do so as they advance in their careers.

The 'ECR Featured Researchers' section [on the journal's blog](#) highlights recently published research in the *Journal of Biogeography* by ECRs and is written by ECRs. These highlights allow ECR authors to share with readers a more personal perspective on the motivations, challenges and novelty associated with their research, thus building a community around and beyond the journal itself. Finally, the *Journal of Biogeography* 'Innovation Awards' aim to acknowledge outstanding research contributions of ECRs in advancing the field of biogeography (Dawson et al., 2023). Together, these initiatives led by the senior editors have demonstrated a strong commitment by the *Journal of Biogeography* to support ECRs through advancing their professional growth, providing a platform for networking and knowledge sharing while also increasing their visibility and overall recognition within the wider research community.

Unfortunately, the shift to excessive APCs for OA by for-profit publishers threatens the ECRs that these worthy initiatives seek to support. Because of the precarity of ECRs, both financially and with respect to the career stage, the high APCs associated with OA have particularly detrimental effects on career development. Moreover, a shift to full OA with high APCs would raise serious concerns about scientific integrity and compatibility with the values upheld by the biogeography community, including ECRs. ECRs represent the future of the discipline, and we have written this section to voice our concerns on behalf of ECRs everywhere.

Any shift to fully OA with excessive APCs would disadvantage ECRs in several ways:

1. **Pay-to-publish model:** The move to a pay-to-publish OA model creates an additional financial barrier for ECRs, who often lack the necessary funds to cover exorbitant APCs. This includes postdocs on fixed-term contracts who rely on grants and fellowships to conduct independent research from their current labs (e.g. as lead PIs) and junior research group leaders who are already financially burdened setting up a new lab. Once the contract and funding run out, these ECRs may lose their university affiliation and be faced with relying on the goodwill of their previous institutions or senior colleagues, forcing them into difficult decisions between publishing OA versus using their limited funding for other financial commitments. This is further exacerbated for ECRs from the Global South (see above), creating greater inequality between researchers from wealthy and poorer economies (Haelewaters et al., 2021).
2. **Increasing workload of Associate Editors:** An Associate Editor's (AE) work handling a manuscript consists of the following steps: initial screening, reviewer selection, working through the manuscript in detail, reading reviewer reports, writing editorial decisions, reviewing revised drafts and author responses, and so on until the final decision. This workload is done on a voluntary basis. The popularity of OA could have the knock-on effect of increasing the associated workload over time due to the growing number of incoming manuscripts (e.g., including those for special issues, a common tactic for OA journals—see point #3 below) unless editorial boards are also expanded. Nevertheless, expanding the number of submissions still represents more work for unpaid editors as a whole, either through increased individual workload or by having more people give their time for free. Moreover, the current 'reviewer crisis' (Dawson, 2023) often requires AEs to effectively act as additional reviewer to meet processing timelines, further increasing their burden. These circumstances disproportionately affect ECRs by placing additional work pressures (Creaton, 2021). Consistently increasing the workload of AEs, especially ECRs, is unsustainable and risks a decrease in editorial quality.
3. **The proliferation of special issues and the publication of more papers:** The proliferation of special issues is a common but questionable practice with full-OA journals. The concept applies a subtle social pressure on authors, nudging them to view special issues as desirable, resulting in the publisher accumulating more paid-for

content. This effectively values profit over authors' decision on the best venue for their own work. Special issues can provide numerous benefits to journals, such as enhancing scientific impact and visibility, while attracting high-quality submissions and being highly profitable for publishers with an OA model (Repiso et al., 2021). However, pushing an ever-increasing number of special issues diminishes their value, burdens AEs with an overwhelming workload and potentially compromises editorial quality. This situation can be particularly adverse for ECRs, who, at a critical career stage, find themselves spending time away from their own research to voluntarily handle an increasing volume of manuscripts.

In summary, ECRs play a key role on editorial boards by promoting diversity and inclusion, helping the progression of other ECRs, and contributing novel perspectives and ideas that support journal development (e.g., new methodologies, emerging topics). We commend the *Journal of Biogeography* for its past commitments to supporting ECRs, and we strongly advocate against any consideration of a shift to a full-OA model that would jeopardise these commitments. Going forward, we recommend that academic journals prioritise ECRs' career growth and provide financial support for ECR publishing and editing, such as through APC fee waivers and compensation for reviewing and editing (Hotaling et al., 2023). These changes are essential for a sustainable academic publishing landscape. We also recommend stabilising or reducing targets for the number of special issues and general submissions, which are oversimplistic and subject to perverse incentives (see above), and instead focusing on helping authors of regular submissions publish their best work possible in a journal of high quality.

4 | FINAL PERSPECTIVE AND OUTLOOK

Publishing high-quality scientific journals costs money, and we support a reasonable cost-recovery model for academic publishers based on charges to authors, institutions or subscribers. We also support the principle of OA that makes scientific content freely available. However, to keep advancing the field of biogeography and science in general, a new paradigm needs to be reached, one that keeps the costs of publishing affordable for authors and that compensates scientists for their professional services instead of one that is designed to produce a high-profit margin for the publisher.

We have written this editorial and engaged in the work stoppage as a way of communicating to our colleagues and to profit-based journals the seriousness and depth of our concerns and as a way of promoting further dialogue. We are willing to discuss these concerns to reach a mutually beneficial compromise with the publisher of JBI. However, we are also ready to resign our positions as AEs if the publisher of JBI were to take the unfortunate step of shifting to a full OA model with high APCs without considering full equity for GS and ECR researchers. We recognise that some [steps have been made along these lines](#), but this is yet inadequate and disproportionate to the considerable profits made by many publishers. AEs

usually work without financial compensation or other incentives (such as discounts or credits), with the ultimate goal of advancing the field of biogeography by supporting high-quality, peer-reviewed, cutting-edge research. In contrast, Wiley, the owner and publisher of the *Journal of Biogeography*, has had a reported annual revenue in recent years of over 2 billion USD per annum with a gross profit margin **averaging nearly 70%**. Wiley reports their performance using the —i.e., operating profit as a percentage of revenue—**controversial adjusted EBITDA profit metric**, and this shows the company operates at a very satisfactory level of a **20% margin**. Research-related publications **reportedly form a large part of their revenue**. Other academic publishers such as **Elsevier show similar revenues and gross profits**. Given that the *Journal of Biogeography* has a proud history as a thought leader in our discipline, we are firmly against a business model that maintains the already substantial profits made by academic publishing houses at the cost of the increased financial burden to authors, increased workload of volunteer editors and reducing the scientific quality of academic journals in jeopardy.

KEYWORDS

article processing charge, biodiversity, biogeography, equity, Global South, open access publishing

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors of this editorial are currently Associate Editors or on the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Biogeography*, and most have recently participated in a temporary work stoppage. Many of the authors have previously published their research in the *Journal of Biogeography* or other Wiley outlets.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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BIOSKETCH

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