



Quo vadis ERA ? - Editorial 2024

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Editorial

The first volume of ERA was completed in 2003. Over the last two decades, the journal has diligently pursued its stated aims, as declared in the editorial of its inaugural issue: "to serve as a free, browsable, non-proprietary, searchable electronic publication which can be inexpensively and quickly produced and distributed via the Internet to make ethnobotanical research material available worldwide" (McClatchey & Thomas, 2003). ERA at that time attempted to fill a gap that existing journals in the field had left:

- publication with complete open access to information
- inexpensive publication
- rapid peer-review and publication
- continuous publication of peer-reviewed research
- multi-media support for various data
- support of a plurality of perspectives and languages

Now, after 20 years of publication, ERA still follows these guidelines, and still provides completely free open access publications for both authors and readers. However, publication practice does have changed over the years.

Since its inception, almost than 30 volumes have been published, and the journal has expanded significantly. It now receives manuscripts from considerably wider geographical locations than ever before, also including ethnobiological and ethnozoological contributions. Naturally, this growth has led to higher rejection rates, as only the best manuscripts can be published.

Originally published at the University of Hawaii, the journal moved to the Botanical Research Institute of Texas (both USA), and after a hiatus of about 2 years was then transferred to Saving Knowledge, and published at the Department of Ethnobotany, Institute of Botany, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia. In early 2024 the journal was completely transferred to Ilia State University, where it is now also hosted.

ERA is now indexed in Scopus and Crossref, and due to indexing regulations on the one hand, and requests from authors and readers across all language barriers, has discontinued the publication of manuscripts in languages other than English. Some sections, e.g. the "Repatriation of Ethnobotanical Studies" section that allowed for the republication of ethnobotanical manuscripts in local language, were in so little demand that they have been discontinued. Similarly, due to the endless

possibilities to presenting multimedia in social networks and other venues, this aspect has become essentially obsolete in ERA.

Since its change in Publisher and Editorial team in 2019, the CiteScore of ERA has increased from 0.7 to 3.4, and ERA is now in Q1 for Social Sciences (both in Cultural Studies and Anthropology) and Q2 for Agricultural and Biological Sciences (Plant Science) as well as Environmental Science (Nature and Landscape Conservation).

While submission rates have essentially quadrupled during the last years, peer review and publication speed have also improved considerably. A first editorial decision on rejection or submission to review of a manuscript takes now about 3 days, the final acceptance and publication about 115 days. The overall acceptance rate of ERA stands currently at 13%.

A considerable number of submissions must be declined outright without being sent to reviewers. Reasons for rejection vary and may include improper formatting, untidiness, and poor language. Sadly, many authors do not bother to read or use the comprehensive Author Guidelines and submit manuscripts that have been rejected by other journals, without even taking the effort to adjust the format to ERA. Such manuscripts will be rejected outright.

Notably, some other frequent and important misconceptions persist: the first relates to the aims of ethnobotany in general and ERA in particular, the second concerns the use of statistical analysis methods, and the third the difference between "use" and "knowledge".

The first misconception can occur with any type of paper, yet it is most often associated with reports on medicinal plants. Many authors produce an annotated list of plant species, indicating the ailments for which they are used in traditional medicine from a given locality. This represents documentation of traditional knowledge preserved in that locality, and it is its primary value. However, authors often claim that the given list has special value, revealing potentialities for further research and development of new medicines and pharmaceutical products. We find such claims in the conclusions or even as the stated aim of a study in the introduction. Such claims can be made in only one case: if the authors have discovered a strikingly effective use of a species that has never been reported as a medicinal plant before. Otherwise, it is too naïve to suggest that the plants in your list have not already been screened in the laboratories of international and local pharmaceutical companies — unless, let us emphasize again, you report a novel and very effective use of a new species. Nonetheless, an annotated list of species from a region where such research has not been conducted can still have important value. It serves as documentation of traditional ethnobotanical knowledge, which represent the primary aims of ethnobotanical research: identifying the plant species used and understanding how they are utilized within different segments of the local society. To establish these relationships, rigorous statistical analysis is required — an additional challenge faced by rejected manuscripts.

The second misconception is related to exactly this stage of research as we often find that authors limit the analysis of their data by relying solely on ethnobotanical indices. Some authors even confuse quantitative description with statistical analysis. Let's be clear: ethnobotanical indices and reporting percentage shares are supplements to statistical analysis. In fact, the relevance of these indices can be questioned (Leonti, 2022; Zenderland et al., 2019). While we do not discourage the use of indices, it is essential to recognize that they are mere measures — tools for quantification that standardize data, similar to percent shares. To establish whether the differences indicated by indices and percent shares are significant, statistical tests and ordination methods are necessary. Such analyses allow us to uncover well-established relationships between humans and plants, lending rigor to our conclusions. Therefore, we encourage authors to complement indices with statistical tests (e.g., ANOVA) and multivariate models (e.g., PCA, nMDS). In addition, many authors combine data from experts (healers, key informants) and regular informants in the index calculation, which makes the obtained figures essentially meaningless, given that both groups often hold different knowledge sets.

Many authors also fail to distinguish between "use" - i.e., the actual use of a species, and "knowledge" - the simple knowing about the potential use of a species. This is especially problematic given that a participant may "know" about a use, but may have never actually practiced that use, and may not even know the respective species, but only its vernacular name. Especially in cases where authors do not bother to collect voucher specimens, this leads to completely useless datasets, given that there is no possibility whatsoever for reproducing the study, and in many cases to wrong reports, given that many species inevitably will be wrongly identified, and thus linked to an incorrect use.

Last, authors still often ignore the fact that ERA is a journal of EthnoBOTANY, i.e. that solid botanical knowledge and correct vouchering, identification, nomenclature and deposit of vouchers in a recognized herbarium are in fact core requirements for all publications.

That ERA remains completely free of APC and is completely open access is only possible due to the support of Ilia State University and an unpaid editorial, layout and copyediting team, and of course depends on the unpaid work of a plethora of reviewers. This however means that any reader and author asked to review manuscripts should take on this task, considering that at some point other colleagues will be tasked to review their respective submissions.

As editors we hope that ERA, with the help of all colleagues involved in the journal, will continue to grow.

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