I would never have applied for the position of Editor-in-Chief in 1997 had I not been asked to do so by the then General Secretary of ICES. The job description read that applicants should have “a wide knowledge of marine science, good international contacts, and editorial experience, in addition to excellent English and a working knowledge of French”. Although I am pedantic, knew quite a few fisheries scientists, had served two guest-editorships for symposia, and could buy a “baguette” in every French village, I would not have considered myself fully qualified on any of these points. However, being asked to follow in the footsteps of such giants of marine science as Ray Beverton and John Blaxter is of course good for one’s self-esteem. It took a dive when I found out that mine was the only application!

I got into a bed already made. The Journal had expanded from three issues a year in 1991 to six issues in 1995, and the number of pages had nearly tripled over the same period. The incorporation of peer-reviewed proceedings of ICES Symposia in 1995 had both broadened the range of topics covered and increased the number of contributions by scientists outside the regular ICES community. I saw my main task as being to consolidate this trend from a typically fisheries-orientated journal servicing the North Atlantic and linked seas towards a journal with a worldwide readership. In an effort to raise the Journal’s citation index, I also wanted to prioritize high-quality, preferably interdisciplinary, contributions rather than expand further. During my tenure, some 40% of manuscripts submitted didn’t make it to publication.

Another major concern to me was the delay between submission and publication, a main stumbling block in attracting really good contributions. Before and during my incumbency of the post, we struggled with page limits and with interference between regular and symposium issues, sometimes causing backlogs. I believe that the latter have largely been straightened out and electronic file transfer has speeded up the entire process. Manuscripts travel back and forth over the world within days, where formerly extensive postal delays were the order of the day. Now, 50% of the published papers appear within twelve months of submission and, since 2002, a few have been published within six months, suggesting that improvements are still possible.

The introduction of six regular issues and two symposium issues from 2004 should help further speed up the turnover rate. However, it worries me that prolonged delays are often caused by authors not making timely responses to requests for revision and are therefore largely unavoidable.

Apart from these more elusive issues, the main task of an editor is down-to-earth. There is neither fun in writing rejection letters — so letting the author “perish” — nor in serving largely as a clearing-house for excellent papers. To get some job satisfaction, it is always a challenge to try, aided by a small army of trustworthy (though sometimes tardy) reviewers responsible for checking the scientific contents, to raise the scientific and grammatical standard of an unacceptable manuscript to an acceptable level as well as to find flaws in the logic of the good ones. Editing does not begin with knowledge of the subject, but with close reading: what message is the author trying to convey in each sentence, and how could this be said more effectively and concisely? Most authors forget that printed pages are expensive and so is the time of their readers (and editor!). Another important issue is the use of cryptic jargon and ambiguous statements. My approach has been that if I do not understand a word, sentence, or paragraph, my readers are even less likely to do so. My call to authors is therefore for clear language please, particularly for an interdisciplinary journal that will be read by scientists with very different backgrounds!

Despite all our efforts at being objective, getting one’s paper published in a peer-reviewed journal seems sometimes similar to playing a lottery. Authors exhibit different degrees of meticulousness and stubbornness, reviewers differ in experience and attitude, and each editor applies a different scientific and linguistic standard. Therefore, subjectivity is an inherent aspect of the entire publication process. Rather than trying to expel it, we probably should aim to make the process as transparent as possible. I will make a few observations.

First, authors could avoid a primary rejection if only they made an effort to take in the aims and scope of the Journal. Too often their studies are only of specific local interest, not even attempting to place the results in an international context, and must be sent straight back. However, many authors apparently cannot read or write. Despite clear Notes for Authors inside the cover, they are rarely followed.
Manuscripts are prepared using all types of fancy layout and then sent to the wrong address. Authors are also particularly creative, as well as totally inconsistent, in applying the full range of font types and sizes provided by their software, each figure apparently presenting a new challenge for their artistic impulses. Abuse of references is more difficult to trace, but sometimes I have been perplexed by conclusions that have been drawn from my own studies. Coming to the point also appears difficult. Authors sometimes dwell on irrelevant sidetracks or repeat themselves endlessly. Even after revision and resubmission, the number of words used in the average paper can be easily reduced by up to 25% without loss of content or meaning. In short, it would make an editor’s life a lot easier if more quality control was enforced at an author’s home institution before the product is submitted.

I have also found that, while fondness of rhetoric and lack of conciseness is typical of English-speaking scientists, those from other countries often use as few words as possible, sometimes to the extent that texts are close to incomprehensible. As a Dutchman, I have a lot of sympathy for their problems and this is where editors must help. Rest assured though, they will if the science is good enough. Still, in an era of word processors, all authors could at least invoke the help of a spell checker. It is an offence not to use such a facility!

The real burden is finding suitable reviewers who respond promptly. Let me first say that some willing workhorses are extremely cooperative, thorough, and efficient. Others, however, appear to pass out while the clock keeps running. Even though I always check by e-mail first whether a potential reviewer can commit himself to a specific deadline, sending out reminders is the order of the day. Then, when reviews finally arrive, one sometimes wonders why they have been awaited! Bright scientists are not always good reviewers. Building up a reliable network is the secret of any editor, but this limited resource can easily be overexploited. Sometimes it helps to put some moral pressure on authors of recently published articles and ask them to do at least two reviews to compensate for the time investment of the two peer-scientists who have made their own publication possible! While this does ease the problem, the quality of their first review does not always warrant a second one. Simply put, too few scientists attach as much importance to reviewing as they do to getting their own work into print. That situation is unsustainable in the long run.

What makes a review thorough? We provide general guidelines, but each manuscript is different and may require a unique approach. In addition to identifying apparent inconsistencies, a good review should challenge the author to rethink his analysis and his conclusions, but in a positive undertone. Increasingly, good reviews are signed. This is not surprising, because they are something to be proud of. Unhelpful reviews are those that just provide opinions. One reviewer recently observed that the authors should have used a different data set, applied a different analysis, and selected a different topic! Such reviews are of course anonymous. It is my firm opinion that the disadvantages of the traditional anonymous review system outweigh the advantages, because it gives the false impression of objectivity. Moreover, it is in direct conflict with our societal attitude towards justice. No one has ever asked me to reveal a reviewer’s name, but my conscience would have had a hard time keeping it secret! Although I have often played with the idea of accepting only signed reviews, this would probably only have further reduced the already limited resource available for reviewing.

Why one would resign from such a rewarding position is in fact a simple question to answer. Initially, experience grows rapidly, but in my case this learning process has almost stopped, and boredom has started to take over. In particular, I have grown an inflammatory allergy for recurring makeweights: In the current study, the present authors start to explore…. CUT IT OUT! Also, my effectiveness in pursuing my ambitions appears to decline exponentially with time. After six years at the helm, I have to admit that there is little to be gained by myself or the Journal from my remaining in harness. But more importantly, I would like to publish a few things myself in my remaining years!

The Journal is thriving. The number of submissions is steadily increasing, the ISI factor in 2002 (nearly 1.8) was higher than ever before, and the joint ICES/Elsevier account has an annual surplus that helps ICES achieve some of its communication and other objectives. Therefore, it seems a good time to pass my responsibilities over to Andrew Payne, the new Editor-in-Chief from CEFAS (MAFF Fisheries Laboratory Lowestoft). However, I have to record that the quality of the Journal during my tenure has been the achievement of the entire editorial team, not mine.

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