

# Still a purpose for *ECOS*... (?)

*At a time when BANC and ECOS are regrouping, and assessing how best to serve the current generations of conservation thinkers, this article takes a personal look at the evolutionary path of ECOS and raises queries about how BANC can take ECOS forward.*

## MARTIN SPRAY

### Shades of unerotic grey

Those of us with long memories may recall the rather chaotic freshness of the first issues of *ECOS*, and remember how it acquired respect and authority as it matured and 'settled down'. Its purpose, says the first issue in 1980, was to provide "a medium of communication which is entirely independent [...] from existing institutions". Although there were publications a-plenty, there was "no journal or periodical which covers the broad range of conservation topics [and] none of the existing publications has attempted to bridge the gap between the professional and the popular literature". *ECOS* was intended to serve as that bridge.

Publications, including website ones, still abound, joined by a myriad blogs, and our independence seems at least as important as ever, as NGOs become increasingly institutionalised and conformist, and what is left of our agencies survive by focusing on land management and agriculture, and doing as they are told. Meanwhile, *ECOS* remains a pragmatic and exploring publication that has always been inclined to question and pioneer, rather than follow and parrot. While it was gaining its reputation and a wider readership, however, it perhaps lost some of its sharp bluntness. And I have the feeling that the words I read here stand a little more aloof from what they describe than they used to.

The spectrum of articles and styles in *ECOS* runs from blog to academic paper, with most somewhere in between. Hopefully they have the spark of a blog but with more substance. I sense, though, that the content has, let's say, become a little more scholarly. Some of the articles more or less meet accepted criteria for academic journals, but the majority probably - and a large proportion most definitely - do not. Nonetheless I frequently see *ECOS* articles cited in what are usually accepted as academic publications.

### Styled for conviction

In the academic tradition, publication is systematically subject to peer review, whether anonymous or otherwise. Instead of peer-review, *ECOS* has a partial, informal, and only advisory, commenting scheme. Some articles are discussed in detail by the editor and one or more readers; some are sent to specialists for comment, some are not. There is, of course, an enormous amount of so-called grey literature, including progress and technical reports, government documents, and a deluge of websites and blogs, which is not subject to formal (or any) quality control (nor subject to the constraints of commercial publishers). *ECOS* articles, we hope, are generally more

complete, more thought-through, and less ephemeral than much of this, although it is also hoped that contributions serve as kites, bubbles, or cock-shies, as much of this literature does. As many *ECOS* readers are students, one hopes that any use by them of items published here will be rigorously assessed.

A consequence of authors thinking or acting as if *ECOS* is an academic publication is that the language style in which some articles are written is distinctive. In particular, the third person, the passive voice, and jargon, edge into the writing. And one concludes, sometimes, that writers are pulling their punches. Occasionally, one cannot tell: the writing is 'neutral' or hesitant, even when clear, and an author's 'real' thinking about a situation is obscured. It can be difficult to square this notion of professionalism with language that makes one's point of view clear. Thus, a reader may assume that the 'temperature' of the subject is lower than the writer judges it to be.

One might say that the writer has left passion behind. This is, I think, because such writing is taken to be of a more acceptable 'professional' nature, and will be accepted as more authoritative than something written in a warmer style. This may not be the case: it depends, of course, on the reader. It seems reasonable to seek a mix of styles in these pages. I, for instance, look for the first person, as well as the third; poetry of expression, as well as measured prose; emotional attachment, as well as rationality; fire in the voice, as well as crystal; and – always – commitment to what is being said.

I'm not trying to denigrate *ECOS*, or to praise it - merely to point out that, whereas some writers and publishers claim *ECOS* as - in the old sense - a learned journal, its editors and BANC do not. This may seem an old-fashioned view of publishing, and a rigid one. Although not intended to be that, it is certainly my opinion that there is an embarrassment of second-rate 'academic journals' both in print and online, and I do not want to see *ECOS* put into the same stable with them. It seems also that there is no let-up in the pressure on people in 'academic' positions to publish, and that wherever they are accepted will be claimed as an academic publication. It is delightful and welcome when they deliberately add their weight to our efforts, but not when it is to increase their count of Brownie points.

### The added-value blog

The editor reminds me that amongst key criteria for writing for *ECOS* are plain English, quality of writing, the author's independence, a challenge to orthodox thinking, avoidance of predictability, and avoidance of a 'corporate line'. Much of this might amount to "clever people analysing what is really going on", according to one of BANC's Council members who confesses to be underwhelmed by the general standard of academic contributions in the countryside and conservation sectors.

So, it's not a journal and not a blog, but often has bits of both. *ECOS* is multi-disciplinary. It crosses boundaries, and does not sit within any camp of practitioners or professional groups. It mixes natural science and social science; its authors argue with qualitative and with quantitative points. It is rational, but expressing touchy-

feely reasons for defending the natural world is encouraged. All this diversity and lack of a bunker mentality is part of the distinction – but it may be a liability too.

Do we have the right recipe for *ECOS* to flourish, and be useful, in the future? Is it written in appropriate language, or is it unintelligible, elite, and a turn-off? Does it get its messages to the people we need to influence? And does it matter whether it is on paper or on-line? The web offers the whole spectrum that we currently use, and more...

In fact, we should ask if we actually *need* *ECOS*. Perhaps it adds unnecessary complexity to our professional lives, or to our personal passions. If they can survive without it, why would we pay for some extra – and sometimes extraordinary – points? And there's the dilemma: for those of us who want to creep beyond our comfort zones and look beyond our normal horizons, how much are we prepared to pay – when with just a few clicks on the web we can conjure up a feast of argument and counter-argument, sober analysis and maverick comment?

If resources become tighter, how would we feel about a paperless *ECOS*, maybe with on-demand printing for those who want a copy on the shelf? Even younger readers have argued to keep *ECOS* as hard copy and as something to "read on the train", but bottom line costs may force this decision uncomfortably soon...

*Martin Spray* has been editor of *ECOS* and is its assistant editor. This is a personal comment, but the advice and suggestions of Rick Minter and Alison Parfitt are much appreciated.  
spraypludds@hotmail.com

