EDITOR’S MESSAGE

The Importance of Criticism and of Keeping it in Perspective

Greetings! I hope this editorial finds you well and enjoying the end of the summer season. As of the writing of this editorial, I have been Editor-in-Chief of the Journal for nearly 2 years, and my tenure is winding down. The experience has been rewarding in many ways, and I want to spend this editorial discussing something that I have experienced as both an author and, now, as an Editor.

Criticism. Admittedly, when I assumed the position of Editor, my initial reaction to hearing the word criticism was drastically different than it is now. Two years ago, I would have quickly answered “no” if one were to ask me whether I enjoyed being criticized. However, criticism goes with the territory in my position, whether I am viewing critical comments provided by referees and Associate Editors or interacting with authors who are upset with the outcomes of the review process. Certainly, all of you can relate to having your work criticized during the peer review process. I am now convinced that understanding and embracing criticism, as well as maintaining perspective when dealing with it are some of the most important components of successfully publishing science. I offer the 2 quotes below because they articulate the thought process I believe is necessary when attempting to accept and use criticism in a positive manner.

“We need very strong ears to hear ourselves judged frankly, and because there are few who can endure frank criticism without being stung by it, those who venture to criticize us perform a remarkable act of friendship…”

—Michel de Montaigne

“Criticism is necessary and useful; it is often indispensable; but it can never take the place of action, or be even a poor substitute for it. The function of the mere critic is of very subordinate usefulness. It is the doer of deeds who actually counts in the battle for life, and not the man who looks on and says how the fight ought to be fought, without himself sharing the stress and the danger.”

—Theodore Roosevelt

Clearly, accepting criticism is not easy, and all of us have been stung by having our work criticized by others. However, I believe the last portion of the first quote is important to consider. During the peer review process, the referees and Associate Editor are indeed providing authors with a service, although the author in me has a hard time likening it to friendship! Regardless, having others criticize your work inevitably improves the end product, and thoughtful comments provided by referees and Associate Editors should be embraced by authors. I realize it is difficult to embrace comments at all times, but I encourage all authors to keep in mind that doing so makes the peer review process more effective and rewarding.

Personally, I have always been a fan of Theodore Roosevelt, and he provided many classic quotes on a variety of topics. Obviously, the quote above had absolutely nothing to do with peer review when it was spoken, but it holds lessons that I believe are important. For authors, criticism is useful and receiving critical comments on your work is necessary to ensure publication rigor. For referees, simply being critical of another’s work does not by default make your comments relevant. As a referee, your criticisms become relevant because you are a doer of deeds. In other words, you have experience in the field of study detailed in the manuscript and have perspective capable of benefiting the authors. What makes your thoughts important to authors is that you have experience and are providing criticisms based on knowledge.

Everyone has heard the slang “been there, done that.” In my eyes, the “been there, done that” adage makes it easier to accept criticisms and to keep them in perspective. As an author, I try to keep in mind that those criticizing my work are doing so because they have knowledge and experience that can benefit the rigor of my work. Not all criticisms will be useful, but some will, and the ones that are, provide me with a tangible benefit. I offer these thoughts because I have now seen the peer review process from both sides of the fence, so to speak. I have grown to embrace criticism as an author after being exposed to it daily as an Editor, having looked at literally thousands of review comments provided by referees and Associate Editors. In so doing, I have found more value in the peer review process and have grown to greatly appreciate what it offers authors. As fellow authors, I hope you will embrace criticism and see the real value of receiving critical comments on your work from folks that, as Roosevelt said, are “doers.”

In This Issue

In my opinion, this issue of the Journal contains a little something for everyone. I believe one would be hard pressed to find an issue of the Journal in recent times that contains a slate of articles with a broader scope than those in this issue. Collectively, the articles you will find represent the breadth of work being conducted in the wildlife management arena and serve as a testament to the relevance and importance of what we do. Several articles detail basic demographics of species ranging from black bears to common loons, and habitat selection patterns of mule deer and spotted owls are detailed in articles that should prove useful to managers.

DOI: 10.2193/2009-238