

GUEST EDITORIAL

How the European Society for Evolutionary Biology and the *Journal of Evolutionary Biology* were founded

At the European Society for Evolutionary Biology (ESEB) congress in Uppsala, Sweden, in August 2007, I was invited to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the founding of the Society and the Society's journal, the *Journal of Evolutionary Biology* (JEB), with a talk describing their origin. This Guest Editorial is based on that talk.

The ESEB did not emerge from a vacuum. An informal group had started to meet annually in the early 1980s to discuss evolutionary biology, mostly from the perspective of population genetics. It consisted of Wim Scharloo, Gerdien de Jong and Arie van Noordwijk at Utrecht, Suresh Jayakar and Laura Zonta at Pavia, Bengt Olle Bengtsson at Lund, Volker Loeschke and Freddie Christiansen at Aarhus, Jürgen Jacobs at Munich, Klaus Wöhrmann at Tübingen, and many others. Before I moved to Europe they had invited me to give a talk at their 1982 meeting in the Bavarian Alps, and after I moved to Basel in 1983 I attended meetings in Padua (Italy) and Denmark. At those meetings the need for a journal and the difficulty in finding a publisher were often discussed, but not all were convinced that a society with regular meetings would be a good idea. When I emerged from the 1985 meeting in Denmark particularly struck by disagreements over strategy, a seed had been planted.

In 1986, probably because I had edited a special edition for the Birkhäuser journal *Experientia* and was in the process of expanding it into a book (*The Evolution of Sex and its Consequences*), the head of Birkhäuser in Basel, Hanspeter Thur, came to my office and asked me to found a journal with a society to back it up. The offer was unexpected. It solved one problem (finding a publisher for a journal) while creating another (founding a society).

My experience in Europe suggested that the need was real, but the decision was not easy, for it was clear that there were others who might feel slighted. After thinking long and hard, I decided to do it, hoping to minimize any offense my decision might cause but willing to accept any unavoidable costs to achieve the larger goal.

To spread the word, I attended meetings on evolutionary topics in 1986 and 1987 in Budapest, Prague, Dijon, Montpellier and Nottingham. I encountered much support in Eastern Europe, where the Wall was not yet down and scientists were hungry for more contact with the West. In Western Europe I met with support from those

with an international orientation and with resistance from those with a local orientation. The standards implied by internationalization appeared to threaten local heroes with comfortable positions. EU and anti-EU politics played a small but noticeable role. The British could and did waver between Europe and their Sceptered Isle ('fog in the Channel, Europe cut-off'). The Americans thought they had done it already in St. Louis in 1946 when they founded the Society for the Study of Evolution. The Canadians (and others) disagreed. Some sceptics said they thought I was doing it simply for self-aggrandizement. While resistance gave reason to quit, much of the discussion indicated that a journal and a society were in fact badly needed to pull people together.

To get a journal, we needed a society – that was Birkhäuser's condition – and to found a society, we needed a meeting. Thus we not only needed to pull together an editorial board: we needed speakers and money to bring them; we needed legal status with a constitution and bylaws; and we needed consensus and support, which we received from the engagement and assistance of some of the members of that pre-existing group, especially Wim Scharloo. In the winter and spring of 1987/88 we worked hard on organizing, before e-mail and the Web, by letter and by telephone.

There were some advantages to my position in Basel. Switzerland had long been famous as neutral, centrally located and harmless. Basel was an old university with a strong tradition, recognized throughout Europe. It was convenient to let a young American take the lead. He was not yet entangled in local history, and when he stumbled clumsily and blundered innocently, he fitted easily into European expectations and surprised no one. His language happened to be English, a language for publication to which almost everyone was already resigned. There was an exchange at the founding congress between some French and some Swedes on this issue, with the Poles supporting the Swedes with the argument that they had invested a lot in learning English and did not want to have to learn French on top of it. At that point, I seem to recall, Pierre-Henri Gouyon, who was a strong supporter of internationalizing evolutionary biology in France, helped things along *avec un petit bon mot*: 'The international language of science is *bad* English'. A bit of humour at a critical junction can help a lot.

In 1987, there was a great group in Basel. It included Arie van Noordwijk, Paul and Regula Schmid-Hempel, Barbara Koenig, Jacob Koella, Martin Gebhardt, Sabine Henrich, Jacqui Shykoff, Christine Müller, Thomas Wolf and Lukas Keller. They all pulled together to help organize and run the conference. We got financial support (the founding congress cost about CHF 50 000) from the Swiss Nationalfonds, the Basel chemical industry, the University of Basel, the ESF Plant Population Biology Network and three Swiss banks. In no case did I have to write anything more than a brief letter with an enclosure to generate a contribution. The Baslers were proud of their University and willing to support its initiatives.

The founding congress took place during 26–30 August 1987. It began with a reception on the plaza of the Zoology Institute at Rheinsprung 9, overlooking the Rhine, continued with talks in the Kollegengebäude at Petersplatz 1, and concluded with a banquet at the Safran Zunft at Gerbergasse 11. We had expected about 350 participants, but the many late registrations raised that to about 450. On the first morning of talks, 27 August, Arthur Cain defended the adaptationist programme and Dick Lewontin attacked it. Wim Scharloo, who had suggested that pairing, felt fulfilled. That evening the participants had dinner on boats on the Rhine. On the second evening, at 8 pm, ESEB was officially founded during its first business meeting, in the Grosser Hörsaal of the Zoology Institute. The talks and posters went well. The buzz on the street was positive.

On the Sunday morning following the Congress, Bev and I hosted the speakers and organizing committee to brunch at our house in Arlesheim, an event favoured by beautiful weather and relief that all had gone well. Among those present were John Harper, Bill Hamilton, Graham Bell, Brian Hall, Gerd Müller, Bruce Levin, Reinhard Bürger, Alex Kacelnik, Alasdair Houston, Toni Hoffman, Eberhardt Curio, Jacob Koella, Martin Gebhardt, Sabine Henrich, Paul and Regula Schmid-Hempel, and Christine Müller. That afternoon, after the guests had gone, a reporter from the Basler Zeitung interviewed me about the Congress for an article that would appear in their next science section. After he left, I lingered by myself in the garden for a few minutes in which I felt deeply at peace, an emotion striking enough to remain clearly memorable 20 years later. It appeared that something useful might have been launched.

Before I discuss how the Society and Journal then developed, I would like to recall those with us at the Congress who have since sadly departed. The first to go was Suresh Jayakar (1937–1988), a delightful, gentle man, J.B.S. Haldane's last student, and a distinguished population geneticist at Pavia. Although already seriously ill, Suresh was able to attend the congress, where he sat at a table in the public reception area of the Kollegengebäude and chatted with old friends. The brilliant Polish palaeontologist Toni Hoffman (1950–1992) and

the evolutionary epidemiologist Anne Keymer (1957–1993) both gave great talks in Basel but left us far too soon, their great potential only partially fulfilled. Jürgen Jacobs (1930–1995), long a strong voice for evolutionary ecology in Germany, did not survive to enjoy his retirement. And Christine Müller, who helped organize and run the founding congress as a graduate student, then became a beloved professor in Zürich, left us in 2008, her courage and grace an example to all. They all succumbed to cancer.

The first president of ESEB, Arthur Cain (1921–1999), a great ecological geneticist, presided over the founding meeting and provided critical support and guidance in the early years of the society. Bill Hamilton (1936–2000), in the eyes of many the most creative evolutionary biologist of his century, gave a key talk at the founding congress. He died tragically of an abdominal aneurysm following a bout of malaria contracted in the Congo, where he was searching for evidence on how HIV had entered the human population. John Maynard Smith (1920–2004), the third president of ESEB, a strong supporter of ESEB, and one of our most distinguished evolutionary biologists, left us after a long life packed with distinction in the same year as Wim Scharloo (1928–2004), the fourth president of ESEB, who had done much to support evolutionary thinking in Europe and played an important advisory role during the founding of the Society.

It is thus abundantly clear that a society like ESEB and a journal like the JEB can only succeed with the support of many scientists. I would also like to honour those who have shared the major burdens. The congress organizers take on a major task: Valerio Sbordoni (Rome 1989), Gabor Vida (Debrecen 1991), François Catzeflis (Montpellier 1993), Jos van Damme (Arnhem 1995), Nick Barton (Edinburgh 1997), Antonio Fontdevila (Barcolona 1999), Volker Loeschke (Aarhus 2001), Roger Butlin (Leeds 2003), Jan Kozłowski (Krakow 2005), Jacob Högländ (Uppsala 2007) and their many colleagues. The Society's Presidents have been, in sequence, Arthur Cain, Bengt Olle Bengtsson, John Maynard Smith, John Harper, Wim Scharloo, myself, Godfrey Hewitt, Deborah Charlesworth, Rolf Hoekstra, Paul Brakefield and Isabel Olivieri. Their leadership has been supported by Executive Vice Presidents – Volker Loeschke, Pekka Pamilo, Jos van Damme, Jon Ågen, Xavier Vekemens and Patsy Haccou, and Secretaries – Arie van Noordwijk, Laura Zonta, Wilfried Gabriel, Jacqui Shykoff and Dieter Ebert – who have carried the major burden of managing the details of Society business. After I served the first term as its Managing Editor, the journal has been run by Pierre-Henri Gouyon (1992–1995), Rolf Hoekstra (1996–1999), Peter van Tienderen (2000–2003), Juha Merilä (2004–2007) and Allen Moore (2007–present). They have guided it from infancy to impressive maturity.

The key change in the development of the Journal came in 1998, when we switched publishers from Birkhäuser to

Blackwell Science (now Wiley-Blackwell). It happened because Birkhäuser, which had been acquired by Springer-Verlag, withheld information on its costs and profits. Revenue was not being shared as we thought we had agreed, and we had poor market penetration in North American and the UK. The change to Blackwell Science brought with it many more library subscriptions and a dramatic increase in revenue to the Society. Rolf Hoekstra, who was then Managing Editor, succeeded in implementing faster reviewing and quicker publication. With the support of Blackwell Science, Rolf and his Editorial Board managed to make JEB a more attractive outlet for top authors, with much greater volume, improved quality and greater impact. That trend has continued.

The result of two decades of work by hundreds of people is that meeting organizers can now expect to have 1000–1200 participants. Readers of the journal in 2006 encountered 210 articles spread over 2072 large-format pages, in contrast to a 1988 volume that contained 21 articles occupying 372 small-format pages. ESEB and JEB

are flourishing. I thank and congratulate the many who have made that possible.

During the two decades that the Society and Journal have grown and started to flourish, the impact of evolutionary thought on other fields has increased dramatically. Evolutionary thought is starting to have significant impact on segments of medicine and the social sciences, including parts of anthropology, economics, political science and psychology. It will take continuous attention to sound foundations to keep the broader influence of evolutionary thought constructive and reliable. I hope and trust that ESEB and JEB will continue to play that role.

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