

Editorial board members are a non-random sample of ecological experts

To the Editor — Courchamp & Bradshaw's¹ attempt to identify an ecological canon is ambitious, laudable and a welcome addition to prior efforts^{2–4}. Unfortunately, I am concerned that their use of editorial board members as a proxy for “experts in ecology” limits confidence in the conclusions that can be drawn from their study. For their results to be broadly applicable, the sampling frame of their survey must reflect the population of interest. Journal editorial boards, including those surveyed by Courchamp & Bradshaw, fail to capture the global distribution and gender ratio of experts in ecology^{5–7}, and hence do not meet a fundamental methodological requirement.

The use of journal editorial boards to nominate and choose must-read articles could bias the resulting list in two important ways. First, the articles selected could reflect a more narrow scope of epistemological, disciplinary, or methodological perspectives represented by male ecologists, or those trained or working in the small number of countries from which editors are drawn. Second, fewer articles by women or scientists based in the Global South

might have been nominated or selected for inclusion because of the way in which both of these factors influence assessments of article ‘importance’^{8–10}. That Courchamp & Bradshaw highlighted the coverage errors in their sampling¹¹ as insights meriting follow-up analyses¹², instead of attempting to assess with other methods how they might have influenced their results, is remarkable.

Editors are indeed experts, but very few of the world's experts are editors. Until Courchamp & Bradshaw's survey is repeated with demographically and geographically distinct populations of qualified scientists, the extent to which the list of must-read papers they report reflects the consensus of the ecological community remains an open question.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing financial interests.