Scholars Create Influential Journal for About $100 a Year

A group of herpetologists—researchers who study reptiles and amphibians—has been quietly demonstrating that it's possible to put together a well-regarded, researcher-run journal with the tiniest of budgets and no help from a publisher.

The journal, *Herpetological Conservation and Biology*, caught my eye as a well-developed example of a movement for grass-roots scholarly publishing that has been rapidly picking up speed. The herpetology publication, founded in 2006, is an online-only, open-access, peer-reviewed journal with a budget of about $100 a year. (That money comes out of the editors' pockets.) Unlike most science journals, it charges no author or download fees. It has a submission-to-publication turnaround time measured in weeks or at most a few months.

And it has just hit a milestone: The editors learned in December 2010 that *HCB* will be included in Journal Citation Reports, a service run by the commercial publisher Thomson Reuters that calculates impact factors for journals—a significant measure of importance for many researchers. *HCB* will receive its first impact rating in 2012 or 2013, and the editors expect the journal to rate highly. That credential will help reassure potential contributors, especially researchers who don't yet have tenure, that publishing an article in *HCB* will be good for their careers.

Judged by the number of visitors to the site, the journal has caught on. In its first year, 2006, it received just over 6,000 unique visitors. In 2010 it received 42,288, according to the editors. Readers from more than 160 countries came to the site. And the number of submissions that are deemed good enough to be sent out for peer-review stage—more than 100 in 2010—has more than doubled since 2006, according to Malcolm L. McCallum, the managing editor. He says *HCB*’s acceptance rate for submissions that make it to peer review is running about 50 to 60 percent.

It also appears to have credibility in the field. "It is a journal that fills a niche and has many respected authors and editors," James B.
Murphy, curator of the department of herpetology at the Smithsonian Institution's National Zoological Park, told me in an e-mail.

I talked to some of HCB's editors to find out why they started the journal, how it runs, and what they've learned about making a do-it-yourself publishing venture a success. A mix of university-based researchers and scientists who work for various local, state, and federal agencies, they have different specialties—frogs, turtles, snakes, and other herpetiles—but are united in their sense that the journal meets a need and that it works because it's truly a group effort. They built the Web site and the manuscript tracking system themselves. They pay a tiny Web-hosting fee. They share the workload among seven main editors, each responsible for one subject area. They recruit graduate students and junior researchers as copy editors and assistant editors, grooming the next generation of editorial labor in the belief that a journal's survival depends on its having a reliable succession of caretakers. "Rather than having one editor covering a lot of papers, we have a lot of editors covering a few papers, and doing a real good job," Mr. McCallum told me.

According to R. Bruce Bury, the journal's editor in chief, HCB was created to fill a gap left by the demise of some earlier journals in the field, including Herpetological Natural History. Based in Oregon, Mr. Bury is a research zoologist with the U.S. Geological Survey's Forest and Rangeland Ecosystem Science Center. In an e-mail, he described the journal as "a creation of biologists, for biologists."

Mr. Bury and Raymond A. Saumure, who edits the journal's chelonian section (on turtles and tortoises), say HCB gives researchers an outlet for work that other journals shy away from, such as the kind of descriptive surveying that helps support conservation work. A turtle expert, Mr. Saumure heads the research department at the Springs Preserve, operated by the Las Vegas Valley Water District, in Nevada. He told me that most herpetological journals don't want surveys; they seek out hypothesis-driven work. But surveys "are critical," he said. If you don't know what lives in an area, "how are you going to protect it?" Natural history, "which is also somewhat shunned" by many journals, is welcome at HCB, he said.

Because of its openness to such work and because it charges no fees, the journal attracts many submissions from field researchers based outside the United States. Some of those would-be contributors would otherwise be shut out of publishing, either...
because they can't afford the usual fees or because they're doing work overlooked by other publications.

Mr. Saumure pointed out that *HCB* also reaches North American herpetologists who work as agency researchers or land managers. Those specialists want access to the latest research, but not many of them have the institutional access to professional journals that their university-based colleagues enjoy. *HCB* also gives them an outlet for their own work. "These agencies are more and more pushing their people to publish articles, not just reports," Mr. Saumure said, and an article is likely to find a wider audience than a report. "In our field, if it isn't published, it isn't finished."

What *HCB*'s editors have come up with strikes me as an attractive, flexible, inclusive model, one that could be transplanted to many fields in the humanities as well as in the sciences. The trick, it seems, is finding the right hard-working group of scholar-editors to run it.