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### The past, present and future of African herpetology

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*Editorial: mini-review*

## The past, present and future of African herpetology

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**Abstract.**—After 47 years and 60 volumes, editorial policy in the scholarly journal of the Herpetological Association of Africa has changed from largely unscientific to strictly scientific. I investigate the causes for this by examining the changes in editorial policy throughout the history of the journal and find that there has been a gradual change with some important milestones. Of key importance were the introduction of the peer-review process in 1979 and the inception of a newsletter in 1983. Interest in African herpetology is growing and the quality and quantity of articles in *African Journal of Herpetology* are seen to continue to increase. The future may include changes in the way that the content is produced, but will continue to provide a platform for herpetological discoveries on the African continent; thereby verifying the maxim: *ex Africa aliquid semper novi*.

**Key words.**—peer-review, herpetology, Africa

Donald G. Broadley founded the Herpetological Association of Africa in 1965, together with *The Journal of the Herpetological Association of Africa*. This first issue of Volume 1 contained an editorial by Broadley, which stated: “The Journal is not intended to be a medium for the publication of scientific papers and it should not be quoted in the literature” (Broadley 1965, 1996). This year, 2011, we have reached Volume 60 and over the 47 years of publications have come to a diametrically opposed editorial policy, to wit: the *African Journal of Herpetology* is intended solely as a medium for the publication of scientific papers and is regularly quoted in the general scientific literature. However, the subject matter of the journal has remained the same, pertaining to African reptiles and amphibians. So how did this remarkable turn-around come about and what is the future of *African Journal of Herpetology*?

This history of the Herpetological Association of Africa (HAA) has been well documented from its beginnings to 1996 by Broadley (1996). The first 15 volumes were edited by Broadley, in which he also undertook the majority of authorship (indeed it was Volume 3 before there was an article by anyone but Broadley). Broadley’s contributions to African herpetology continued to be outstanding and were detailed when he reached the age of 65 and the HAA, which he founded, reached 40 years old (Branch 1997). However, it should be noted that Broadley’s contributions have not stopped and he has continued to publish on African herpetology since his ‘retirement’ so that his publications now number around 230, with more in preparation (D. Broadley, pers. comm.).

In this mini-review I review changes in editorial policy and sample six volumes of publications across the 60 published to date (all are now available online and free of

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charge to HAA members at the portal: [www.tandfonline.com](http://www.tandfonline.com)). Changes in subject matter, references, author numbers and addresses are summarised in order to make predictions about the future of *African Journal of Herpetology*.

## METHODS

To review changes in editorial policy and articles published by the journal over its 60 volumes, I have taken two separate approaches. First was to take a qualitative look at milestones in editorial policy of the journal to show timing of the change from Broadley's original stance outlined in Volume 1 (see above) to the current diametrically opposed editorial policy in today's journal. Second, I have taken a more quantitative approach in sampling six volumes, representing 'snap-shots' of the journal over its full publication history, to provide information on the change in articles published during this period. The mean (and standard error [SE]) of number of authors and references were recorded for each volume (not including material such as editorials, bibliographies, member announcements, book reviews, trivia, etc.), together with the country of their address. Subject matter was determined by a retrospective application of keywords which were converted to Wordles (word clouds in which the frequency determines the size of the word: [www.wordle.net](http://www.wordle.net)) and by identifying which herpetological order the article focuses on. Lastly, I review the contents of Volume 60 comparing it with other publications on African reptiles and amphibians (via a search for 'Africa\* AND amphibia\*' and 'Africa\* AND reptil\*' on Web of Science, Thomson Reuters from 1980 to 2010) using their system of key words (KeyWords Plus). I then use these summaries to highlight trends and future directions for the *African Journal of Herpetology* and African herpetology as a whole.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Past

The summary of milestones for the journal shows that for the first 15 years, the *Journal of the Herpetological Association of Africa* published 'non-technical' articles that principally informed other readers of how to keep and breed a variety of African reptiles and amphibians (Table 1; Figs. 1 & 2). Articles were generally single-authored (mean = 1.06; SE = 0.06) and rarely included references (mean = 0.94; SE = 0.47). Peer-review was introduced in 1979 for 'semi-technical' articles, although authors were still advised to submit technical articles to other journals (Channing 1979). Within a few years, all articles were submitted to full peer-review (Branch 1983). While the subject matter remained similar, articles were generally multi-authored (mean = 1.25; SE = 0.16) and each included a number of references (mean = 6.13; SE = 2.98; Fig. 3). At this time, introduction of a newsletter provided a vehicle for much that was considered 'non-technical', and this saw the subject matter of the journal containing more scientific key words (Figs. 4–6). Subsequent editors moved more and more 'non-technical' content over to the newsletter to allow journal space to be dedicated to scientific content (Table 1). The numbers of authors and references per paper continue to rise steeply and this trend is particularly prominent between Volumes 40 and 60 (Figs. 4–6).

Table 1. Milestones in editorial policy and growth of *African Journal of Herpetology*

Year	Editor	Milestone	Significance	Volume (issue)
1957	Broadley	Broadley launches Volume 1 of <i>Journal of the Herpetological Association of Rhodesia</i>	First publication of the Herpetological Association of Rhodesia, which was to be the forerunner of the <i>JHAA</i>	
1965		First publication of <i>JHAA</i> with Broadley as editor	Volume 1 of the Herpetological Association of Africa	1
1966		First article not authored by Broadley	Other authors see the value in sharing their observations	3
1972		Increase from one to two volumes per year	Two volumes per year are usually published from 1971	8
1976		No journal appears		
1977	Channing	Channing replaces Broadley as Editor	Alan Channing took over as Editor from 1977	16
		<i>JHAA</i> can print photographs	Suitable illustrations are solicited	16
1978		Three volumes per year	In 1978 and 1980 three volumes are published per year, otherwise the frequency varies between one and two annually.	17
1979		Referees introduced	Semi-technical articles are sent to a referee (or two) for constructive comments regarding the content and clarity, before being published.	21
1980	Haacke	Haacke replaces Channing as Editor	Wulf Haacke took over as Editor	25
1980		Standard names and vouchers required as editorial policy	Standardisation of names and insistence that vouchers are kept for published articles.	22
1983	Branch	Branch replaces Haacke as Editor	Handed over to Bill Branch in 1983	29
1983		Branch launches HAA Newsletter	HAA newsletter handles much of the miscellanea previously carried in the journal.	29
1983		Full peer-review introduced	Full peer-review becomes editorial policy	29
1985		<i>JHAA</i> now printed	Production of the printed journal is moved to the Bloemfontein Museum	31
1988		A computer and word processor are used	Desk-top publishing is in the hands of the Editor	35
1993	Mouton	Mouton replaces Branch as Editor	October 1993, Le Fras Mouton as Editor	

Table 1 (Continued)

Year	Editor	Milestone	Significance	Volume (issue)
1993		More content moved to Newsletter	Life History Notes, Geographical Distribution, and Venoms and Snakebite, together with 'Recent African Herpetological Literature', are moved to (newly named) <i>African Herp News</i>	42
1995		Two issues are printed per volume	Content increases sufficiently to print two issues within one volume per year as standard	44 (1)
1996		<i>JHAA</i> renamed as <i>African Journal of Herpetology</i>	At the General Meeting Bill Branch's proposal that the name of the journal be changed to <i>African Journal of Herpetology</i> was accepted	45 (1)
1998	Whiting	Whiting replaces Mouton as Editor	Martin Whiting, 10 December 1997–August 2000	
		Complex studies encouraged	Studies involving hypothesis testing and employing rigorous quantitative techniques are especially encouraged	47 (1)
		Forum	Forum articles were solicited which provided room to debate key issues in African herpetology.	47 (1)
		Format overhauled	Professional desktop publishing software and glossy paper in a smaller format gave <i>AJH</i> a world-class look.	47 (1)
		Supplemental data	Website serves as source for material which cannot be printed in journal	47 (1)
2000	Alexander	Alexander replaces Whiting	Graham Alexander replaces Martin Whiting as Editor	49 (1)
2005		First associate editors instated	Alexander inveigles associate editors: Bauer, Henan and Tolley	54 (1)
2004		<i>AJH</i> accredited South Africa's Department of Education's list	Authors from South African universities draw funding when they published in <i>AJH</i>	53 (1)
2005		Contents on citation indexing database	<i>AJH</i> contents indexed in Science Citation Index (Thomson Reuters Web of Science)	54 (1)
2006	Flemming	Flemming replaces Alexander	Alex Flemming replaces Graham Alexander as Editor	55 (1)

Table 1 (Continued)

Year	Editor	Milestone	Significance	Volume (issue)
2009	Measey	Measey replaces Flemming	John Measey replaces Alex Flemming as Editor	58 (1)
		Book reviews also moved to <i>AHN</i>	<i>AJH</i> only publishes refereed scientific articles divided into long and short, reviews and mini-reviews.	59 (1)
		New associate editors instated	Blackburn, Greenbaum and Köhler join as associate editors	59–60
		Adherence to ethical guidelines compulsory	Authors, editors and reviewers required to adhere to published ethical guidelines.	59 (1)
		No publication fee	<i>AJH</i> publishes all articles free of charge to authors	59 (1)
		Online access to all <i>JHAA</i> and <i>AJH</i>	Entire catalogue of <i>AJH</i> is available online and is free of charge to members of HAA.	59 (2)
		Double-blind peer-review	All articles published have been double-blind reviewed	60 (1)
		Student prize initiated	The 'Don Broadley prize for excellence in African Herpetology' is given to the student who publishes the most outstanding manuscript in <i>AJH</i> . Candidate manuscripts are selected by the editors and judged by the editorial committee.	60

Notes: *JHAA*, *Journal of the Herpetological Association of Africa*; *AJH*, *African Journal of Herpetology*; *AHN*, *African Herp News*.

Gradual changes in editorial policy, particularly related to peer-review and the movement of non-peer-review items to a newsletter, are responsible for remodelling *African Journal of Herpetology* from Broadley's first editorial policy in 1965 to that of today (Table 1). Scientific interest in African herpetology has grown (Fig. 7) and there is still great value in the contents of the early volumes, just as the current issues of the newsletter appeal to much the same audience. Editorial policy of *African Herp News* has also changed over time such that many of the articles submitted there are also subject to peer-review (at the Editor's discretion [Maritz 2010]). Despite the changes, some aspects of the journal have remained unchanged. The subject matter, African reptiles and amphibians, continues without any editorial policies broadening the scope. Journal editors remain unpaid and their work is largely conducted in evenings and at weekends. Despite the challenging and sometimes hazardous nature of African herpetology, all present and past editors (see Table 1) are currently alive and well, and perhaps more noteworthy is that all are still active herpetologists.

## Volume 10



Figure 1. Volume 10 of the *Journal of the Herpetological Association of Africa* was published in 1973 and contained nine articles on a mixture of topics relating in the main to husbandry and of snakes and lizards. Each article had an average of 1.1 references (only one-third of articles contained references) and one author, with contributions from South Africa, Zimbabwe and the USA.

## Present

As the popularity for research on Africa's herpetofauna increases (Fig. 8), so the quantity of submissions to *African Journal of Herpetology* increases, enabling editorial policies that can select for increasing scientific quality. Current editorial policy extends Whiting's (1998) preference for hypothesis-driven research by making it a requirement. Authors are also required to abide by an ethical code (as are reviewers and editors), which can be found at the journal's websites ([www.africanherpetology.org](http://www.africanherpetology.org) and <http://www.tandfonline.com/ther>). Scientists are human and do behave badly (Martinson *et al.* 2005; Benos *et al.* 2005), and the ethical code exists to protect all concerned in the publishing of articles. While guidelines cannot be strictly enforced, since the introduction of the code there has been a rejection of several submissions that fell outside of the guidelines. Authors are asked to declare

## Volume 20



Figure 2. Volume 20 found the *Journal of the Herpetological Association of Africa* edited by Channing with most articles on anurans, concentrating on distribution with more articles on husbandry of snakes and lizards. In addition to South African contributions, a number of projects are listed by a Zambian herpetologist.

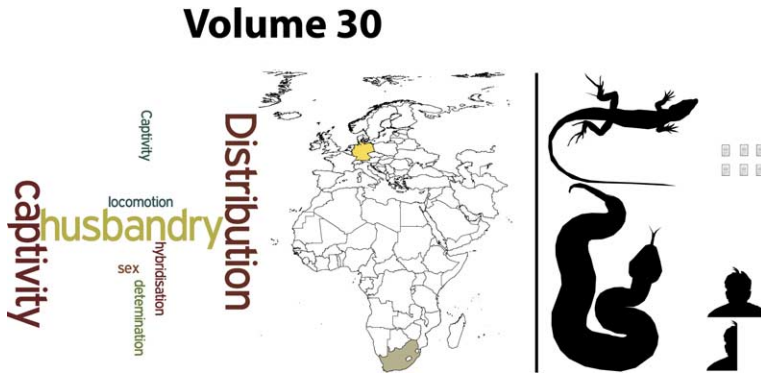


Figure 3. Volume 30, with Branch as Editor, saw the majority of articles swinging back to ophidians and their distribution, and to a lesser extent husbandry. More authors appeared per article (mean = 1.25; SE = 0.16), from South Africa and Europe as well as a mean of 6.13 (SE = 2.98) references.

their adhesion to the *African Journal of Herpetology* ethical code during their manuscript submission through our online manuscript tracking system, ScholarOne (<http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/ther>).

All submissions have double-blind peer-review (neither names of authors or reviewers are disclosed), a policy which prevents discrimination based on author identity (Budden *et al.* 2008), and is preferred by the majority of publishing scientists (Ware 2011). Multiple rounds of peer-review are onerous on authors, editors and reviewers and are avoided where possible. In most cases, multiple rounds of peer-review could be avoided by more careful preparation or thorough reworking of manuscripts by authors, and we urge all prospective authors to be rigorous in their manuscript preparation. When peer-review substantially increases the quality of an article, multiple rounds appear to be in the interest of both authors and editors.

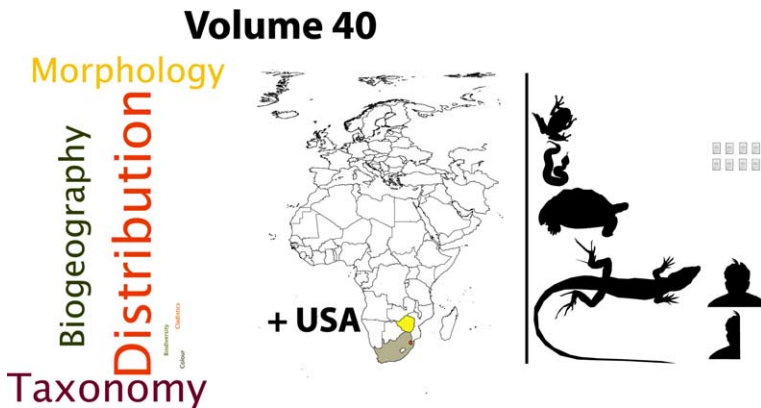


Figure 4. Volume 40 continued with Branch as Editor and has a wider range of herpetofauna with an increasing emphasis on taxonomy. The number of authors (mean = 1.56; SE = 0.20) and references (mean = 7.94; SE = 2.40) increased slightly, and contributions were mainly from southern Africa and the USA. It should be noted that Volume 40 contained the proceedings of the second HAA Symposium at Bloemfontein.



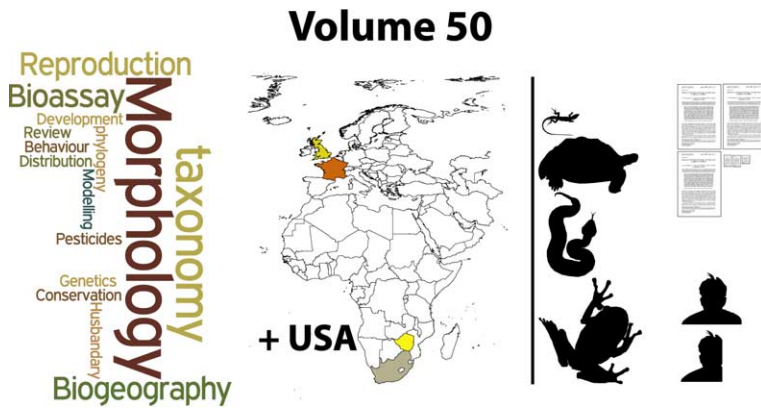


Figure 5. Volume 50 had Alexander as Editor and saw a dramatic increase in the scope of the journal's subject areas and number of references (mean = 34.40; SE = 7.41). Taxa covered remained similar, as did the number of authors (mean = 1.8; SE = 0.39) and their countries (southern Africa, Europe and USA).

Recent data across all scientific disciplines suggest that peer-review does improve published material, as well as dealing with academic misconduct (Ware 2011). The referees of *African Journal of Herpetology* provide an invaluable service to the journal and to African herpetology and I would like to take this opportunity to extend my renewed thanks to them. However, soliciting reviews from referees is becoming more difficult, and it is important for all to realise that the peer-review system is a reciprocal process. The principle objective is that publication in *African Journal of Herpetology* should represent excellent scientific work on the reptiles and amphibians of Africa above any other concern, and the editorial team is particularly interested in receiving submissions from authors throughout the continent. To this end, I am very happy to reiterate that there are no publication fees in *African Journal of Herpetology* (unless colour printing is required; colour in electronic media is free).

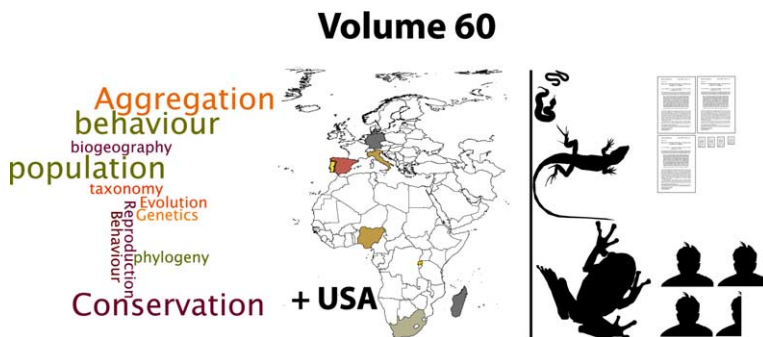


Figure 6. Volume 60 was edited by Measey, seeing authors from many more African countries including Madagascar, Nigeria and Rwanda. While the number of references stayed similar (mean = 35.35; SE = 4.99), the mean number of authors markedly increased to 3.14 (SE = 0.36). Gymnophiona featured in addition to other African herpetofauna previously seen.

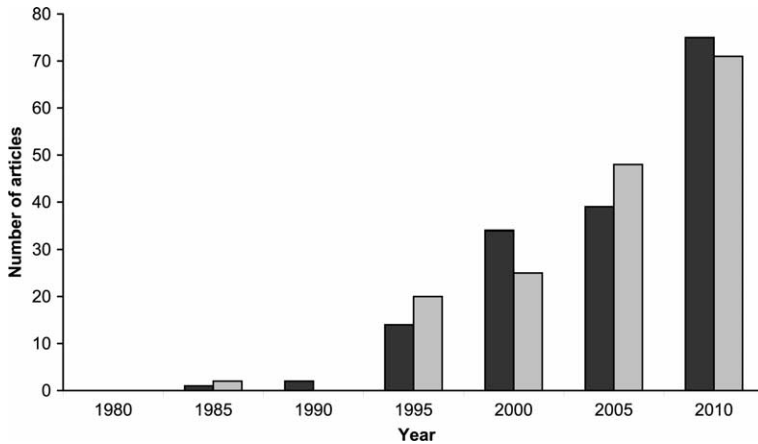


Figure 7. The increasing popularity of African herpetofauna in the scientific literature, as evidenced by search results on Web of Science, Thomson Reuters. Reptiles (black bars from a search for ‘Africa\* AND reptil\*’) and amphibians (grey bars from a search for ‘Africa\* AND amphibia\*’) show a similar trend for the years selected.

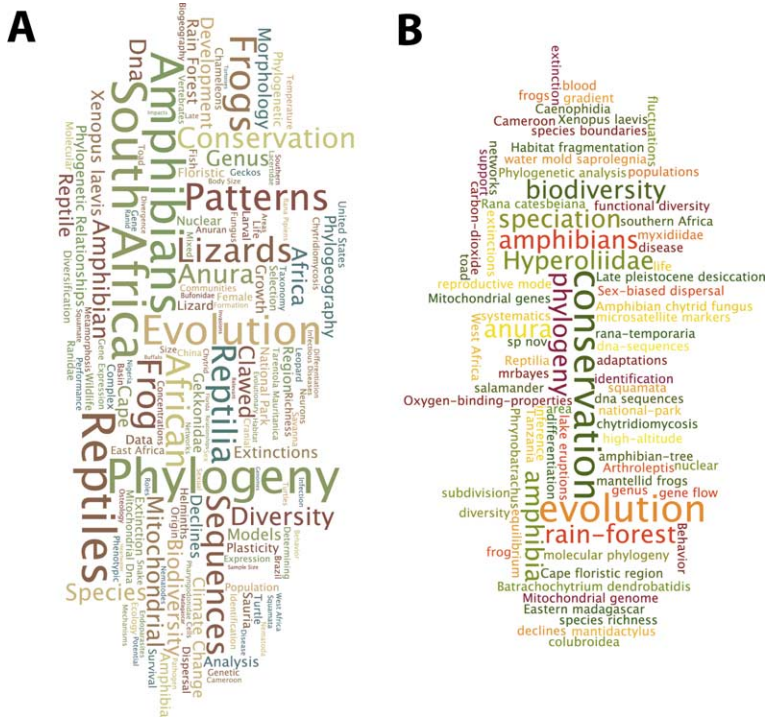


Figure 8. Wordles of Thomson Reuters’ Web of Science KeyWords Plus for (A) all articles on African herpetofauna in 2010 compared with (B) those published in *African Journal of Herpetology*. Shared prominent keywords are ‘conservation’, ‘phylogeny’ and ‘evolution’.

In addition, we now host online supplementary information for articles that require additional detail not produced in print.

The ‘Don Broadley prize for excellence in African Herpetology’ honours Donald G. Broadley by recognising the student who publishes the most outstanding manuscript in the preceding two volumes of *African Journal of Herpetology*. Candidates declare their application at the time of submission, and these are judged by the editorial committee with the prize presented at the HAA meeting. It is intended that the prize encourage students to submit their best work to *African Journal of Herpetology* as well as recognising and rewarding the hard work of students who work on African reptiles and amphibians. The first prize awarded for articles published by students in Volumes 58 and 59 was awarded jointly to Gavin Masterson (Masterson *et al.* 2009) and Anita Meyer (Meyer *et al.* 2010). We greatly look forward to judging the next round of student prizes.

Interest is increasing in African herpetology, as demonstrated by the dramatically increasing numbers of articles on Web of Science (WoS), especially since the late 1990s (Fig. 7), which is when *African Journal of Herpetology* was added to the WoS (Table 1). A comparison of keywords published for African reptiles and amphibians in 2010 by WoS shows a similarity with those published by *African Journal of Herpetology* (Fig. 8). ‘Phylogeny’, ‘conservation’ and ‘evolution’ all come out as strong subject areas in *African Journal of Herpetology* and other journals that publish papers on African herpetofauna.

## Volume 60

African herpetology in general, and publications in *African Journal of Herpetology* in particular, are still dominated by novel findings that encompass the disciplines of phylogenetic analysis, conservation and evolution. New species of reptiles continue to be described, with evidence coming from morphology and molecular data (Heineke *et al.* 2011; Gehring *et al.* 2011). Where adults are already described, descriptions are still required of other life-history stages (Sprague & Zimkus 2011). Relationships between taxa have traditionally used morphology, which can still provide important insights by using phylogenetic methodologies (Moyer & Jackson 2011), whereas phylogenies based on molecules alone (Van der Meijden *et al.* 2011; Salvi *et al.* 2011) can provide new hypothetical frameworks for insights into evolutionary pathways. Equally, the molecular approach can be used to provide biogeographical insight into species boundaries (Perera *et al.* 2011). Novel studies and observations on behaviour and distribution can have important implications for conservation (Martín *et al.* 2011; Wilmes *et al.* 2011; Channing & Wahlberg 2011; Yetman & Ferguson 2011; Tessa *et al.* 2011; Measey *et al.* 2011), which has become an important aspect of African herpetology as habitat destruction continues unabated in areas that have been poorly explored. In addition to habitat destruction, anthropogenic impact on African herpetofauna can be more direct in areas where reptiles and amphibians are used as food (Mohneke *et al.* 2011). Lastly, some subject areas have been the subject of many studies which require synthesis to provide new insight and stimulus for new generations of herpetologists (Mouton 2011).

## Future

The world of scientific publishing is moving with great pace, and with it the *African Journal of Herpetology*. In addition to our commitment to publishing hard issues of the journal, all of our content is published online and is freely available to HAA members. This also makes it possible to include more information that is not printed. In future, this could include a change from the current double-blind peer-review policy to one of transparency (Pulverer 2010), where the reviewers' comments and rebuttal by authors are available to view. The online version could contain more varied peer-reviewed supplementary articles. In addition, it is hoped that the increasing numbers of herpetological journals will increasingly work together in future. For example, there may be the opportunity to introduce cascading reviews (De Schutter 2007). Importantly, authors will soon be required to deposit all raw data into public repositories, which allow storage and access to datasets (Reichman *et al.* 2011). Data-sharing is fast becoming an industry standard, in much the same way that deposition of genetic data is already compulsory for *African Journal of Herpetology*, ensuring a more rigorous and transparent publishing process.

In addition to possible changes in the way articles are reviewed and published, we look to increase the numbers of authors from more African countries. It has always been a frustrating irony that most herpetologists live and work in areas of the least herpetological diversity, and this is particularly true of Africa. We would welcome more submissions from more countries in Africa, and would be especially pleased if, in 10 volumes time, we could see much more of the continent covered in terms of authorship (see Fig. 6). Americans and Europeans have been consistent contributors to *African Journal of Herpetology*, and we can only wonder whether African herpetofauna will begin to interest the burgeoning scientific power houses of India and China.

I sincerely hope that the pages of future volumes of *African Journal of Herpetology* will continue to fascinate those of you who have followed from Volume 1, as it does for those readers for whom this is the first of many copies. With certainty, I can predict that Broadley's motto adopted for the journal will continue to stand true for its herpetofauna: *ex Africa aliquid semper novi*.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all editors and associate editors of the journal for their help in compiling this mini-review. Special thanks to Donald G. Broadley (Bulawayo Museum, Zimbabwe) for his personal insights and continued interest. I dedicate this piece to all former *African Journal of Herpetology* editors who, through their hard work, have made the journal the excellent publication that it is today.

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