

Journal of Human Evolution: Resignation of the Editorial Board

For over four decades, the *Journal of Human Evolution* (JHE) has been the flagship journal in paleoanthropological and human evolution research. The longstanding success of JHE rests on the exemplary scholarship of its authors supported by extensive labor on the part of the Editorial board (EB). Elsevier has steadily eroded the infrastructure essential to the success of the journal while simultaneously undermining the core principles and practices that have successfully guided the journal for the past 38 years. While the EB has accommodated the reduction of services to the journal since the early 2000s, the pace has accelerated over the last 10 years to a point that is no longer tenable.

Journal history: *Journal of Human Evolution*, founded in 1972, was reorganized in 1986 to provide greater scholarly attention to and control of the review, revision, and publication of research in the journal. Recognizing that research in human evolution represents a globally diverse community of scholars, two editors-in-chief from different countries took the helm, a structure that has been in place ever since. These editor-scholars purposefully established a working EB of Associate Editors—not an 'editorial board' in name only, without editorial oversight as had led to the initial foundering of JHE—but a group of active scholars expertly capable of handling submissions covering a wide range of topics in a field that is highly interdisciplinary and demands a mix of both broad and fine-scaled expertise. Thirty eight years later, JHE has an impact factor of 3.1 and Scopus cite score of 6.3, both the highest in the field, and has maintained an acceptance rate of ~50%; excellence that results from a set of sustained core principles.

JHE's core principles: Since 1986, JHE has been guided by this set of core principles and structures: 1) the journal is overseen by two editors-in-chief who are committed to journal quality and integrity; 2) the editors select and invite AEs to serve on the EB and in the numbers and expertise they deem necessary to support the scope of submissions; 3) in consultation with the AEs, the editors set the standards for manuscript review; 4) the EB places a premium on the quality of the science and published product over quantity, speed, or profit margins; and 5) the EB is committed to helping authors, especially early career scholars and non-native English speaking scholars, publish their best papers. JHE has flourished for decades under this model. JHE papers are built to last.

Harmful changes to the journal's principles and structures: Over the past 10 years Elsevier made a number of changes that run counter to these successful principles and are harmful to JHE. These changes have increasingly placed Elsevier, not the EB, in control of scientific oversight of the journal and reduced production quality. Elsevier eliminated support for a copy editor and special issues editor. Elsevier's response to our repeated concerns about the need for a copy editor has been to maintain that the editors should not be paying attention to language, grammar, readability, consistency, or accuracy of proper nomenclature or formatting. This advice runs counter to the journal's longstanding emphasis on making every paper as widely accessible and citable as possible, and is especially important for a journal like JHE, which publishes papers dealing with topics that follow international codes such as systematics, stratigraphy, geology, geochronology, and so forth. Elsevier does not attend to this and frequently introduces errors during production that were not present in the accepted manuscript.

Over strong opposition of the editors, Elsevier has been relentlessly pursuing a restructuring of the EB. The goal to reduce the number of AEs to fewer than half the current number will result in fewer AEs handling far more papers, and on topics well outside their areas of expertise. Mimicking structures found in many for-profit journals created in recent years, Elsevier further aims to create a third-tier editorial board that functions as 'figure heads' in name only without any access to submissions or reviews. In 2023, Elsevier unilaterally took full control over the JHE EB scientific structure and composition through their requirement that all JHE AEs be recontracted annually. This action runs counter to their assurances that AE contracts would not undermine our longstanding principle of exercising editorial control of all

scholarly decisions, including recruitment and retention of the expertise necessary to oversee the review process. Elsevier's control of the process has already resulted in reduction of the EB through non-issuance of contracts and attendant lack of access to the paper management system; and in the failure to advance the Early Career Review Board and Fellowship, which was created and approved by the EB in September of 2023 to help support professional development of early career scholars.

In November of this year, Elsevier indicated it would no longer support the dual-editor model that has been a hallmark of JHE since 1986. When the editors vehemently opposed this action, Elsevier said it would support a dual-editor model by cutting the compensation rate by half.

In parallel, the editors have been raising concerns for years about the cost of Open Access (OA) in JHE and the impact on submissions.¹ Elsevier's APC charges in JHE (\$3990 excluding taxes on the JHE website) remain out of reach for much of our authorship, with Elsevier outsourcing its production process to low-quality companies while charging publication fees well in excess of discipline-comparable Elsevier-published journals (e.g., *International Journal of Paleopathology*: \$1910; *Journal of Archaeological Sciences: Reports*: \$2265; *Palaeography, Palaeoclimatology, Palaeoecology*: \$3110; *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*: \$3270;), compared with broad based open access journals such as *Scientific Reports* (IF: 3.8; APC:\$2590), and compared with production costs for nonprofit publishers. Given these high charges, and the negligible number of Elsevier OA agreements, especially in the US, the net effect is that only a small portion of JHE authors can afford to make their science widely and publicly accessible, which runs counter to the journal's (and Elsevier's) pledge of equity and inclusivity.

Despite high APC charges and reduced and out-sourced production, the work of copyediting nonetheless falls to the editor, and regularly involves cleaning up issues introduced during production, slowing down both time to acceptance and time to online publication.² Without editorial oversight, Elsevier's use of outsourced copyediting services yields substandard papers that are bad for science and the discipline and particularly bad for early career authors.

The joint Editors-in-Chief, all Emeritus Editors retired or active in the field, and all but one Associate Editor unanimously agree that these sustained actions of Elsevier are fundamentally incompatible with the ethos of the journal and preclude maintaining the quality and integrity fundamental to JHE's success.

Resignation

It is thus with heartfelt sadness and great regret that we have resigned. This has been an exceptionally painful decision for each of us. The editors who have stewarded the journal over the past 38 years have invested immense time and energy in making JHE the leading journal in paleoanthropological research and have remained loyal and committed to the journal and our authors long after their terms ended. The AEs have been equally loyal and committed. We all care deeply about the journal, our discipline, and our academic community; however, we find we can no longer work with Elsevier in good conscience.

¹Elsevier was slow to establish open access agreements in the UK and across Europe, despite the European Commission (EC) announcement in 2012 of an OA policy for publicly funded research and the EC target for the whole of Europe to reach 60% OA by 2016. Elsevier's efforts to reach open access agreements only began in earnest when academic institutions started cancelling or allowing their Elsevier subscriptions to lapse due to the high subscription costs. So-called 'transformative agreements' that benefitted JHE weren't in place until 2022 for the UK and 2023 for Europe. Regrettably, this delay has had a negative impact on the reputation of the journal, as reflected in the loss of submissions by UK and European authors who refused to submit papers to Elsevier-owned journals, especially when they no longer had access to the journal through their own institutions.

²In fall of 2023, for example, without consulting or informing the editors, Elsevier initiated the use of AI during production, creating article proofs devoid of capitalization of all proper nouns (e.g., formally recognized epochs, site names, countries, cities, genera, etc.) as well italics for genera and species. These AI changes reversed the accepted versions of papers that had already been properly formatted by the handling editors. This was highly embarrassing for the journal and resolution took six months and was achieved only through the persistent efforts of the editors. AI processing continues to be used and regularly reformats submitted manuscripts to change meaning and formatting and require extensive author and editor oversight during proof stage.