

AES356 Wildlife Biology Issues

Policy on citing references: the internet and the printed media

As you know, the content of the internet is not subject to any central editorial control and there are therefore no universal standards for what can and cannot appear there. However some websites are obviously more reliable than others, and some are little more than vehicles for giving wider publicity to printed literature. For instance, websites run by international organisations (e.g. IUCN, UN agencies) or government departments (e.g. EA and DEFRA in UK) are likely to reflect official policy to the letter. Sites run by independent non-governmental organisations (e.g. The National Trust, RSPB, Greenpeace) are likely to vary in terms of the quality of the facts reported and their interpretation. Another difficulty with internet sites is that they can be altered continually, so that what you see today may not be at the same URL address tomorrow.

All this is in sharp contrast to the situation for literature published in academic journals, which are at the opposite end of the scale from the internet in terms of quality and reliability. Papers submitted by authors for possible publication in journals are subjected to a rigorous process of peer refereeing in order to establish whether they are up to publication standard. Even if they are, most authors have to make alterations to their papers before they will be accepted for publication. Be aware however, that academics are advised to 'published or be damned': rubbish does therefore appear in the pages of journals, and some journals are very much better than others! So even at this level it is important to read material critically: you should not adopt a passive mode simply because you are reading a journal paper. Is the data reliable? Are the conclusions drawn from the results inescapable? How seriously should you take any generalities or speculations expressed?

Between the two extremes represented by the internet and the journals is a huge volume of other literature in the form of books and edited volumes of papers on a particular theme (often as the proceedings of a symposium). This material has usually been through a refereeing process of some sort, albeit a less stringent one than that applied by international journals. Then there is the so-called 'grey' literature: privately published (and often un-refereed) reports, articles in 'trade papers' (e.g. New Scientist, Farmers Weekly) or newsletters (e.g. WWF, Friends of the Earth), and newspaper articles. These are not refereed and are therefore inherently less authoritative than material in most journals or books.

Academic journals do not allow the citation of internet sites in support of factual statements in papers. Thus when you are asked to write in the style of a journal, you should not cite websites in your list of references at the end of your piece. This does not mean you should not use the internet to research your topic, for instance in determining government policy on an issue, or finding out the very latest on a researcher's findings via a personal website. The problem is that you need to discover from those internet sources, a legitimate citation to quote in your work. Journal editors always prefer citations of previous journal papers when they are available, but when this is not the case, most published sources (i.e. sources in the printed media) are acceptable.

If something is available to be read in several different forms, the preference for the citation is something like this (key: preferred > less preferred): journal article > edited volume = book > published report (with ISBN number) > other report > trade paper = newsletter > newspapers.

When you are asked to write in the style of a publication lower down the quality pecking order than a refereed journal, you can of course adjust your citation policy accordingly. For instance if you are asked to write a piece as if for *The Guardian* newspaper, you might give the customary list of internet links at the end of your article. In other cases you might give a short list of crucial references to a variety of printed or electronic media.

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