Co-authors gone bad – how to avoid publishing conflicts

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Three scientific authors share their experiences and solutions and ask you for yours (with a sample agreement for co-authors)

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A version of this editorial was published this month in Elsevier's Biological Conservation *journal.*

Disagreements can arise even when co-authors are close colleagues. Professor Richard Primack (right) dramatizes that reality in a staged photo with three graduate students at Boston University. (Photo by Pam Templer)
Conservation biology and related areas of science are increasingly collaborative endeavors. For most of us, working in teams can improve the quality of our research by bringing together people with complementary areas of expertise, generating and refining ideas, and writing and revising manuscripts.

Although working with co-authors is usually rewarding, it can also lead to difficulties. Co-authors may not contribute as much as they promised, or in particularly problematic cases, they may deliberately obstruct the research or publication process.

We have encountered examples of conflicts among co-authors at *Biological Conservation* and have been told about many others. We share some general examples below and then consider how to avoid such conflicts. And finally, based on our experience and readings, we offer a general Co-authors Agreement for use by scientists.

Five examples of conflicts among co-authors

Example 1. Representatives of industry or government are invited to be co-authors on a paper about a conservation issue so that all stakeholders involved are included. However as the paper proceeds to the publication stage, the industry or government scientists refuse to allow the paper to go forward because the results or conclusions are inconsistent with their organization's policies or will cause political or commercial problems. Instead these representatives (or their supervisors) will only allow the paper to go forward if the text is modified to restate, weaken, or omit key results, conclusions, or recommendations. Rather than building consensus, the paper may be blocked from publication at the insistence of a co-author.

Example 2. A co-author blocks the publication of a paper because he/she does not agree with their co-authors' revisions. Such revisions might include those made prior to submission or those made in response to reviewers' comments. Or a co-author feels that they have not had adequate opportunity to provide input into the revision process. This might also happen if a co-author insists on having input on a paper, but is then too busy to do the work. An extreme example is a co-author who disagrees with their co-authors' views and refuses to allow a paper to be submitted until all of his/her requests are fully met, even though the other co-authors are opposed to these changes. As a result the original paper may never be submitted, or if it was submitted, it may never be fully revised and re-submitted.

Example 3. Communication among co-authors breaks down and stops because of personality conflicts, professional rivalries, or jealousies. In this case, a paper may not move forward in the publication process.

Share your own co-author calamities (and solutions)

The authors invite you to share your own stories of bad (or problematic) co-authors and how you dealt with them. Or alternatively, please share a story of good co-authors. See you in the comment section.

Example 4. A paper may be submitted for publication without input from one or more co-authors. This situation of submitting papers without the knowledge and permission of co-authors appears to be happening more frequently now. It is a worrying trend, and it contrary to professional standards and against journal policy.

Example 5. Some of the most problematic cases occur when professors and graduate students are co-authors on a paper. Because professors have much greater power and experience in these situations, unethical and selfish professors can manipulate authorships to their advantage, dictating who will be co-author without consulting everyone involved. In extreme cases, professors can take primary or even exclusive credit for work done primarily by their students, or even block their students from submitting papers.

Recommendations for avoiding conflict

These are obviously unusual and worrying situations, but they do happen. How can you avoid such situations? And what can you do to deal with them once they develop?

Research tells us that trust is among the most important factors in successful collaborations—it is difficult for a team to succeed without it. If co-authors do not trust each other, they can begin to question each other's motivations and actions in every situation. Other essential elements of good collaboration include developing a shared vision and clear expectations, sharing recognition and credit, handling conflict, building a good team, and having fun. Open, honest, and respectful communication is critical for achieving all of these aims, and most successful collaborations maintain good communication throughout the duration of a project.

It can be quite helpful to develop a written agreement, formal or informal, among collaborators at the outset of a project, or at least accept a standard agreement. A diplomatic and efficient approach may be to refer potential co-authors to a published guide rather than developing a new set of guidelines for every project. We offer such an agreement at the end of this editorial.

This step is perhaps taken too rarely, whether because scientists do not like rigid agreements, feel that developing agreements wastes time that would better be spent doing research, or that developing such an agreement could offend some of the co-authors. Spending a bit of time at the outset of a project, though, can help save time by resolving misunderstandings and disagreements later in a project, and can help avoid irreconcilable disagreements. Universities and government research departments sometimes also have their own policies regarding publication. Agreements may be especially important for multi-disciplinary studies where authors may have different publication practices.

Crafting a co-author agreement

A good agreement can include the following components:

- Goals of collaboration
- Roles of individuals
- Guidelines for authorship
- Contingencies and communication strategies
- Methods for handling conflicts, including conflicts of interest.

Creating and abiding by such an agreement can establish clear expectations and facilitate open communication and trust, which are critical to collaborative projects. As a project develops, the agreement may need to be altered — it should not be static. Co-authors may need to be added or dropped, and the roles of co-authors may change, but this should be done through open, honest, and respectful discussion following the guidelines or intent of the team's original agreement.

Relevant to the examples we have highlighted, an agreement might include:

- A statement that prevents one co-author from obstructing the progress of a project or the publication of a paper. For example, an agreement might state that results, conclusions and other parts of the paper will not be altered without the agreement of the majority of authors.
- A statement that if the majority of authors, including the senior author, want to submit a paper for publication or make revisions to a paper, individual co-authors may not block its submission, but rather can remove their names as co-authors if they so desire. Or if a co-author refuses to allow a paper to be submitted, the majority of authors can remove this individual's name as a co-author.

Co-authors who remove their names from the paper could have their contributions mentioned in the acknowledgements, or perhaps could ask to have their contributions removed. The key is to agree to the process before the conflict emerges.

Problems may still arise

However, what would happen if a co-author makes a major contribution to data collection, analysis, or writing, but later asks to withdraw from a paper or is asked by the others to withdraw? Could a project agreement be used to allow the team to use the data, analysis, and writing of the dissenting co-author without the permission of the dissenting co-author? What if it is impossible to fully remove their intellectual contributions to the project or paper? The answers to these questions are not obvious. Consider this final example:

- A group of five authors carries out a combined field and lab project. Author X carries out an essential part of the fieldwork. During the write-up of the project, Author X is dissatisfied with the project paper, and refuses to allow the paper to be published or the data to be used. The other four authors want to submit the paper for publication, but recognize that the paper cannot be published without the data of Author X. Does the data belong to the group or the individual authors? Can the majority of the authors use the data of Author X without his/her permission? An author's agreement might be able to provide some guidance.

Clearly the goal is to avoid these types of conflicts in the first place. In some cases where trust among co-authors is low, an independent colleague or mediator may be able to review an agreement and correspondence to help defuse an awkward and potentially acrimonious situation. In situations involving graduate students, this colleague might be the chair of a department.

There are many other facets that help make collaborations successful, and we refer you to four papers cited here (Albert and Wagner, 2003; Weltzin et al., 2006; Benett, Gadlin, and Levine-Finley 2010; Bennett and Gadlin, 2012) and information on Elsevier's website for further advice.

In our experience, collaborations are valuable to the pursuit of science and are usually personally rewarding. They are a great way to learn new methods, make new friends, and have enriching experiences. We do not want to discourage collaborations; rather we want to encourage *effective* collaborations in which people are aware of potential problems and take steps to avoid and diffuse them before they detract from the value and fun of the science.

Sample co-author agreement for a scientific project

Here's a basic outline of a co-author agreement we prepared, which you can use as a template.

Overall goals and vision

We have agreed to collaborate in scientific research and publish our results in a scientific paper (or perhaps several papers). We agree to the following guidelines as we work together toward this goal. This agreement ends after the paper is published, data are archived, and media inquires conclude.

We enter into this agreement voluntarily, and we can leave the agreement voluntarily as described below.

Who will do what?

Team members are expected to make contributions as specified during the formation of the Team. These responsibilities might include carrying out research, contributing specimens and data, analyzing data, and writing the paper.

The paper will be led by an acknowledged Project Leader (often the principal investigator, research group leader, or graduate supervisor). The Leader will facilitate decision-making and communication among the Team. The Leader may be the person who started the project, who invited members to join the Team, who is expected to do the most work on the project, or who is head of a research group. In some cases, particularly for small groups, the Project will be managed through collective decisions or some other method.

Once the Team is formed, any decisions on adding new co-authors or Team members should be made by consensus rather than individual decisions.

Data for this project belong to the Team for the purposes of this paper. Data will be managed by the people who generate them and shared as needed for analysis. Upon publication, the data will likely be deposited into a permanent, publicly accessible archive, such as DataONE, and in accordance with journal policies. The data will be

credited to the people who created them and will be linked to this paper through the metadata.

Authorship, credit, and responsibility

Authorship will be limited to those who have contributed substantially to the paper. If a member of the Team does not contribute substantially as initially agreed, that person will be removed as a co-author, as determined by the Leader in consultation with the Team.

The Leader will determine the order of authorship for the co-authors based on contributions to the project. In practice the Leader is often be the first, last or corresponding author.

If appropriate to the journal, the acknowledgements of the paper will describe each co-author's specific contributions. The contributions of other collaborators who are not co-authors will also be described in the acknowledgements.

All co-authors share some degree of responsibility for the entire paper as an accurate, verifiable research report. Co-authors are responsible for the accuracy of their contributions, but may have only limited responsibility for other results.

All co-authors must give their permission for publication prior to submission of each version of the paper.

All co-authors can give presentations of this paper after publication, using material in the paper and dataset, providing they reference the paper and their co-authors. Ideally, they will also notify the co-authors of these presentations beforehand.

All co-authors can respond to media inquiries relating to this paper. Press releases should include the names and contact information of all co-authors. Team members should acknowledge the contributions of other co-authors during interviews and encourage reporters to contact them.

Contingencies and communication

The Leader will manage Team communication by organizing regular communications, such as email updates or phone calls. The default might be one communication per month, with more frequent communications when necessary.

All Team members agree to reply to emails and phone call concerning the project, especially drafts of the paper, within a reasonable period of time, such as within one week.

All Team members agree to notify the rest of the team prior to sharing the manuscript with people outside the Team. Team members will be given a chance to comment prior to sharing.

No Team member can block publication of the paper except because of concerns related to scientific soundness — e.g., the data collection, analyses and presentation were done incorrectly. Concerns related to policy, management, or scientific implications are not grounds for a co-author to block publication. If a majority of Team members believe the paper should be published based on sound science, the paper will move forward. Every reasonable effort should be made by the Leader and others to reach a consensus on moving forward with a publication.

Team members may voluntarily remove themselves from the project, and from co-authorship, at any point if they no longer have time for the project or they disagree with some aspect of the project or paper. If a Team member voluntarily leaves the project or is asked to leave the Team because they are opposed to the paper being published, the Team members and Leader will need to discuss with the dissenting member if his/her contributions can still be used, and perhaps described in the Acknowledgements, or will have to be removed from the paper.

Team members are free to develop their own collaborations and directions using the ideas and data in the paper, once it is published. Team members should make every reasonable effort to inform each other when starting new collaborations and spin-off projects that result from this paper. In practice, the Team members may continue to work together on follow-up projects, but this needs to be discussed among the group, and should not be assumed.

Conflict of interest

All Team members will disclose to the Team any real or perceived conflicts of interest related to this project and paper.

All Team members will disclose to the Team whether they or any close family members or associates will benefit financially from this project and paper.

Sources of information on this topic

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