

Opinion

Archiving Primary Data:
Solutions for Long-Term
Studies

James A. Mills,^{1,#,*} Céline Teplitsky,^{2,#,*} Beatriz Arroyo,³
Anne Charmantier,⁴ Peter. H. Becker,⁵ Tim R. Birkhead,⁶
Pierre Bize,⁷ Daniel T. Blumstein,⁸ Christophe Bonenfant,⁹
Stan Boutin,¹⁰ Andrey Bushuev,¹¹ Emmanuelle Cam,¹²
Andrew Cockburn,¹³ Steeve D. Côté,¹⁴ John C. Coulson,¹⁵
Francis Daunt,¹⁶ Niels J. Dingemanse,^{17,18} Blandine Doligez,⁹
Hugh Drummond,¹⁹ Richard H.M. Espie,²⁰
Marco Festa-Bianchet,²¹ Francesca Frentiu,²²
John W. Fitzpatrick,²³ Robert W. Furness,²⁴ Dany Garant,²¹
Gilles Gauthier,¹⁴ Peter R. Grant,²⁵ Michael Griesser,²⁶
Lars Gustafsson,²⁷ Bengt Hansson,²⁸ Michael P. Harris,¹⁶
Frédéric Jiguet,²⁹ Petter Kjellander,³⁰ Erkki Korpimäki,³¹
Charles J. Krebs,³² Luc Lens,³³ John D.C. Linnell,³⁴
Matthew Low,³⁵ Andrew McAdam,³⁶ Antoni Margalida,³⁷
Juha Merilä,³⁸ Anders P. Møller,³⁹ Shinichi Nakagawa,⁴⁰
Jan-Åke Nilsson,²⁷ Ian C.T. Nisbet,⁴¹ Arie J. van Noordwijk,⁴²
Daniel Oro,⁴³ Tomas Pärt,³⁵ Fanie Pelletier,²¹ Jaime Potti,⁴⁴
Benoit Pujol,¹³ Denis Réale,⁴⁵ Robert F. Rockwell,⁴⁶
Yan Ropert-Coudert,⁴⁷ Alexandre Roulin,⁴⁸
James S. Sedinger,⁴⁹ Jon E. Swenson,⁵⁰
Christophe Thébaud,¹² Marcel E. Visser,⁴² Sarah Wanless,¹⁶
David F. Westneat,⁵¹ Alastair J. Wilson,⁵² and
Andreas Zedrosser⁵³

The recent trend for journals to require open access to primary data included in publications has been embraced by many biologists, but has caused apprehension amongst researchers engaged in long-term ecological and evolutionary studies. A worldwide survey of 73 principal investigators (PIs) with long-term studies revealed positive attitudes towards sharing data with the agreement or involvement of the PI, and 93% of PIs have historically shared data. Only 8% were in favor of uncontrolled, open access to primary data while 63% expressed serious concern. We present here their viewpoint on an issue that can have non-trivial scientific consequences. We discuss potential costs of public data archiving and provide possible solutions to meet the needs of journals and researchers.

Long-Term Data Sharing

Several funding agencies, international regulatory bodies, and many major ecological and evolutionary journals now require raw or primary data to be deposited in a permanent open access archive, such as Dryad or TreeBASE, as a condition for funding or publication. The data must be in sufficient detail to allow the analyses in the paper to be replicated. The rationale for open archiving is that archived data are available to posterity when studies are completed, for error-checking, for use in new studies, or for future meta-analysis [1]. In addition it has been argued that the policy would benefit data providers by increasing their citation index through citations by papers with new analyses [1,2].

Although it is claimed that over 95% of scientists in evolution and ecology believe that data should be publicly archived [1], mandatory public data archiving (PDA) is raising many issues in the scientific community as evidenced by debates on websites, in blogs, and in publications ([2–9]; McGlynn, T. (2014) I own my data, until I don't. <http://smallpondscience.com/2014/03/03/i-own-my-data-until-i-dont/>). We focus on the perspective from long-term individual-based studies of wild populations that often span several decades.

Short and long-term ecological studies differ in several important aspects. For example, in the former, data tend to be collected over a short period of time leading to one or two publications, and once published the data in these papers become less valuable to the collector and can be more useful to others with different perspectives or analytical skills. By contrast, in studies that have followed individuals over their lifetimes, a great deal of crucial information is assessed from derived metrics (e.g., survival, lifetime reproductive success) that can only be estimated after many years of fieldwork. Therefore, much value can remain in the primary data even after some of the initial questions have been answered.

Long-term studies are rare and have great scientific value because many important questions in ecology and evolutionary biology can only be answered from the life-histories of recognizable individuals [10]. A detailed analysis of the importance of individual-based studies has been documented elsewhere [10], but a few examples are given in Box 1.

While group discussions and blog posts on PDA-related issues have been flourishing, little is formally known and published about the position and concerns of people collecting long-term data. To fill this gap, a survey was conducted to learn their perspectives, and if current data requirements were perceived as being problematic, to identify potential alternative data-sharing policies that could be acceptable to the journals, the scientific community, and the PIs.

The Survey

To obtain the opinions of scientists with individual-based longitudinal data, a worldwide survey was sent to 146 PIs of long-term research projects. Responses were received from 73 PIs

Box 1. Ecological and Evolutionary Importance of Long-Term Studies

Studies that have followed individuals throughout their lives have yielded important insights into demographic and life-history parameters of wild populations which cannot be obtained from cross-sectional programs. They have provided details on the impact of age, individual quality, status of pair-bond and food abundance on aspects of breeding, recruitment and survival [11–24]; cost of breeding [25]; inbreeding [26–28]; senescence [29–30]; mate choice [31–32]; carry-over and transgenerational effects [33–37] and lifetime reproduction [38–39]. Studies that assembled pedigrees from observational and/or molecular techniques have enabled widespread application of quantitative genetic methods to questions in evolutionary ecology, such as maintenance of genetic variance, inheritance of fitness components and the relative contribution of plasticity and micro-evolutionary processes to phenotypic change [40–47]. Importantly, long-term studies have also been the basis for understanding the impact of climate change [48–51], habitat loss and natural resource overexploitation [52]. To address many of the aspects or issues listed above, researchers must have access to a marked age-structured and pedigreed study population which can take a minimum of 10 to 20 years of monitoring to establish, depending on the generation time of the species.

Trends

Public data archiving is the archiving of primary data used in publications so that they can be preserved and made accessible to all online.

Public data archiving is increasingly required by journals. However, the costs of public data archiving might be underestimated, in particular with respect to long-term studies.

Long-term studies have been responsible for the answers to many important questions in evolution and ecology which could only be answered through following the life-histories of individuals for decades.

Several papers have been published in favor of public data archiving, but a more balanced viewpoint is necessary to allow a discussion to emerge on a code of ethics and ways to preserve and protect the data, encourage the initiation and continuation of long-term studies, and meet the requirements of the whole scientific community.

¹10527A Skyline Drive, Corning, NY 14830, USA

²Département Ecologie et Gestion de la Biodiversité, UMR 7204 CNRS/MNHN/UPMC, Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris, France

³Instituto de Investigacion en Recursos Cinegeticos (IREC) (CSIC-UCLM-JCCM), Ronda de Toledo s/n, 13005 Ciudad, Real, Spain

⁴Centre d'Ecologie Fonctionnelle et Evolutive UMR 5175, Campus CNRS, 1919 Route de Mende, 34293 Montpellier CEDEX 5, France

⁵Institute of Avian Research, 'Vogelwarte Helgoland', An der Vogelwarte 21 D26386 Wilhelmshaven, Germany

⁶Department of Animal and Plant Sciences, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

⁷Institute of Biological and Environmental Sciences, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

⁸Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, University of California, 621 Young Drive South, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1606, USA

⁹CNRS, Université Lyon 1, Université de Lyon, UMR 5558, Laboratoire Biométrie et Biologie Évolutive, 43 boulevard du 11 Novembre 1918, 69622 Villeurbanne CEDEX, France

¹⁰Department of Biological Sciences, University of Alberta, Edmonton,

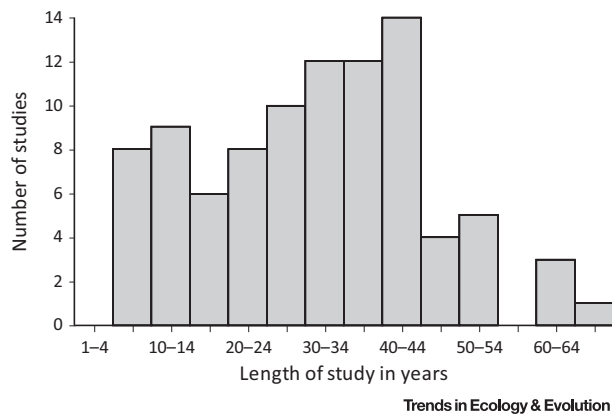


Figure 1. Duration of Studies Undertaken by the Respondents in this Survey.

working on 59 bird studies, 13 mammalian studies, and 1 plant study. The 92 projects (some PIs have several projects) range in duration from 5 to 68 years (Figure 1), with 55% collecting data for more than 30 years. Thirty-five percent of researchers were required to archive data used in a publication by their current funding agency and 19% by their institution. Eight researchers were required to deposit data by both; therefore 59% were not required to archive their data. There was diversity of opinion among PIs about data archiving, but some strong points of consensus emerged. This paper synthesizes the views of all respondents, many of whom have made important contributions to ecology and evolution.

The survey revealed that virtually all PIs were in favor of data sharing with the agreement or involvement of the PI. Historically, 93% of the respondents have shared their data when asked and 80% have collaborated in meta-analyses. In the 1960s to 1970s publications using longitudinal data often involved only one or two authors. However, over the past two decades studies have become more complex and collaborative, with studies commonly involving collaboration among biologists with expertise in a variety of disciplines.

Overall, 63% of PIs were against PDA as currently required. This contrasts with a previous survey of ecological and evolutionary biologists that reported that 95% were in favor of PDA [1]. Among the 36% of respondents in favor of open-access data-archiving in this survey, only six (8% of 73) were in favor of unconditional data archiving. The reasons given by PIs in favor of PDA were similar to those advocated by the archiving journals. By contrast, 91% of PIs supported data sharing when clear rules for data access were in place. These rules could include (i) coauthorship or at least acknowledgment, depending on the level of PI involvement; (ii) no overlap with current projects, particularly projects conducted by students or postdoctoral fellows; and (iii) an agreement that the data go no further than the person to whom they are entrusted.

General Concerns about PDA

The main issues about archiving were centered on what data would be archived and to whom access would be given, as detailed below. However, these concerns are so strong that 41% of respondents said that they have avoided publishing in journals that require data be deposited in open-access archives. Furthermore, 53% intend to avoid publishing in them in the future and, for those who published a major paper involving long-term data early in their careers, 63% indicated that they would not have submitted it to any journal that required data archiving. Avoiding publishing in a high-impact journal can have major consequences in terms of career advancement, and could potentially reduce the prospects of obtaining future financial support; therefore the decision would not be taken lightly.

Alberta T6G 2E9, Canada

¹¹Department of Vertebrate Zoology, Faculty of Biology, Lomonosov Moscow State University, Leninskie Gory 1/12, 119234 Moscow, Russia

¹²UMR 5174 EDB Laboratoire Évolution et Diversité Biologique, CNRS, ENFA, Université Toulouse 3 Paul Sabatier, 31062 Toulouse CEDEX 9, France

¹³Department of Evolution, Ecology and Genetics, Research School of Biology, The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, Australia

¹⁴Département de Biologie and Centre d'Études Nordiques, Université Laval, 1045 avenue de la Médecine, Québec G1V 0A6, Canada

¹⁵29 St Mary's Close, Shincliffe, Durham DH1 2ND, UK

¹⁶Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, Bush Estate, Penicuik, EH26 0QB UK

¹⁷Behavioural Ecology, Department of Biology, Ludwig-Maximilians University of Munich, Planegg-Martinsried, Germany

¹⁸Evolutionary Ecology of Variation Research Group, Max Planck Institute for Ornithology, Seewiesen, Germany

¹⁹Departamento de Ecología Evolutiva, Instituto de Ecología, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, AP 70-275, México DF 04510, México

²⁰Technical Resource Branch, Saskatchewan Ministry of Environment, 3211 Albert Street, Regina, Saskatchewan, S4S 5W6, Canada

²¹Département de Biologie, Université de Sherbrooke, 2500 Boulevard de l'Université, Sherbrooke, Québec J1K 2R1, Canada

²²School of Biomedical Sciences and Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation, Queensland University of Technology, Kelvin Grove, QLD 4059 Australia

²³Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 159 Sapsucker Woods Road, Ithaca, NY 14850, USA

²⁴Graham Kerr Building, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK

²⁵Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544-1003, USA

²⁶Anthropological Institute and Museum, University of Zürich, Zürich, Switzerland

²⁷Department of Animal Ecology, Evolutionary Biology Center, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

²⁸Department of Biology, Lund University, Ecology Building, 223 62, Lund, Sweden

²⁹CESCO, UMR7204 Sorbonne Universités-MNHN-CNRS-UPMC, CP51, 55 Rue Buffon, 75005 Paris, France

In discussions among the survey respondents, it was suggested that the design and data collection of a long-term study constitute a research infrastructure that is the foundation of the publications which form the lifework and careers of researchers, PhD students, and postdoctoral fellows who work on these programs. The analogy can be made to experimental infrastructures which involve the construction of an apparatus that takes years, or sometimes decades, and requires numerous grant applications, institutional support, and deferred publication effort, all of which involve significant risk, but potentially have profound scientific value, both pure and applied. Developing the infrastructure is a necessary prerequisite for project completion. In this case it would not be reasonable for other scientists to have immediate access to the fruits of the inventor's labors. Furthermore, compulsory and unrestricted open access to the apparatus would provide a strong disincentive to making the initial infrastructural investment. The same case can be made for long-term ecological studies.

Specific Concerns from Long-Term Researchers about PDA

Several concerns about the costs of PDA for researchers and the scientific community were addressed previously [5]. We add here the perspective of PIs with long-term studies. Three major concerns were identified during the survey.

Potential Costs to Science

Flawed Science. A major cost would be flawed science resulting from a lack of understanding of the database or the biological system. Open access to long-term data might not allow full understanding of all the subtle contexts, nuances, and issues involved in the biological system and the structure of the database from which the long-term data are collected. It has been argued that if method sections are sufficiently detailed, misunderstanding the system should not be a major source of error [Coulson, T. and Sheldon, B. (2014) Archive your data! Animal ecology in focus. <https://journalofanimalecology.wordpress.com/2014/11/21/archive-your-data/>]. However, not all of the complexities of the biological system can be detailed in a method section without making a paper unwieldy. Hence, without the involvement of the PI, crucial contextual information is likely to be lost under open access, leading to the potential for erroneous assumptions and interpretations which could add to the growing retraction rate in scientific journals [53]. For example, although it was not included as a question, three respondents of the survey indicated that on four occasions their data have been misinterpreted in publications and, once published, errors or misinterpretations are hard to remove.

More Time Spent on Redundant Activities

A potential cost would be simultaneous testing of the same idea on the data. In some cases, hypotheses might have been already investigated but not published by the PIs because they were inconclusive. In addition, the cost of monitoring publications that used PDA and writing replies would be borne by the researcher with long-term data and not by the scientific community. These do not seem to be a productive use of research investment.

Fewer Long-Term Studies

Open-access archiving could reduce the incentives for carrying out long-term studies and would likely result in researchers suspending ongoing studies and declining to undertake new ones. This is predicted by the producer–scrounger game theory [54] where the producer spends time and energy to develop a resource but is unable to monopolize it, thereby creating opportunities for the resource to be exploited by scrounger(s). Over time, as the scrounger strategy increases, the resource decreases. In theory, the fitness of the producer and the scrounger decrease because at some point there are no more resources to scrounge because no more resources are being produced [55,56].

³⁰Grimso Wildlife Research Station, Department of Ecology, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) 73091, Riddarhyttan, Sweden

³¹Section of Ecology, Department of Biology, University of Turku, 20014 Turku, Finland

³²Department of Zoology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia V6T 1Z4, Canada

³³Terrestrial Ecology Unit, Department of Biology, Ghent University, Ledeganckstraat 35, 9000 Gent, Belgium

³⁴Norwegian Institute for Nature Research, PO Box 5685 Sluppen, 7485 Trondheim, Norway

³⁵Department of Ecology, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, 75007 Uppsala, Sweden

³⁶Department of Integrative Biology, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, N1G 2W1, Canada

³⁷Faculty of Life Sciences and Engineering, University of Lleida, 25198 Lleida, Spain

³⁸Ecological Genetics Research Unit, Department of Biosciences, PO Box 65 (Biocenter 3, Viikinkaari 1), University of Helsinki, 00014 Helsinki, Finland

³⁹Laboratoire Ecologie, Systématique et Evolution, Equipe Diversité, Ecologie et Evolution Microbiennes, Bâtiment 362, 91405 Orsay CEDEX, France

⁴⁰Evolution and Ecology Research Centre and School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

⁴¹I.C.T. Nisbet and Company, 150 Alder Lane, North Falmouth, MA 02556, USA

⁴²Department of Animal Ecology, Netherlands Institute of Ecology (NIOO-KNAW), PO Box 50, 6700 AB Wageningen, The Netherlands

⁴³Institut Mediterrani d'Estudis Avançats IMEDEA (CSIC-UIB), Miquel Marqués 21, 07190 Esporles, Mallorca, Spain

⁴⁴Departamento de Ecología Evolutiva, Estación Biológica de Doñana-CSIC, Av. Américo Vespucio s/n, 41092 Seville, Spain

⁴⁵Département des Sciences Biologiques, Université du Québec A Montréal, CP 8888 Cuccursale Centre Ville, Montréal, Québec H3C 3P8, Canada

⁴⁶Vertebrate Zoology, American Museum of Natural History, New York, NY 10024 USA

⁴⁷Institut Pluridisciplinaire Hubert Curien, CNRS UMR7178, 23 rue Becquerel 67087 Strasbourg, France

⁴⁸Department of Ecology and Evolution, University of Lausanne,

Less Collaboration

New collaborations are extremely valuable to make the most of the data, but comparative analyses and meta-analysis among long-term studies would likely suffer because PIs might decline to participate if they are required to archive their data.

Research Funding

Several financial issues have been overlooked by the advocates of PDA. Archiving mutualizes the benefits, but not the costs of long-term studies, because there is no cost to the person accessing the data. This might be a sustainable model when recurrent funding is available, but not when funding is granted on a per project basis. In addition, PDA could incur some new costs for long-term studies because Dryad, for example, has required extra payment for large datasets. Researchers with scarce funding might not be able to absorb this additional cost. Maintaining constant funding is a crucial issue for long-term studies to avoid fatal gaps in the data [10,57], contrasting once again with short-term studies that can be restarted at a later time. Long-term studies of all durations experienced difficulties with funding (Figure 2) because only 33% were fully funded in all years, with the remainder having funding gaps varying in duration from 1 to 19 years (Figure 2). To maintain funding, PIs with long-term projects must keep identifying new uses of the data to obtain short-term funding because recurrent funding is essentially nonexistent [10]. Therefore, PDA could lead to a loss of funding opportunities if data for their next project are routinely mined by other researchers.

Student Experience and Training

A major contribution of long-term studies is that they often provide training to PhD and other postgraduate students and postdoctoral fellows. The PIs that responded to the survey reported that, from their 92 projects, 630 PhDs were awarded (Figure 3A), and 658 postgraduates and 257 postdoctoral fellows participated, for a total of 1545 trainees. This represents a substantial contribution to the training and development of the ecological and evolutionary biology research community. Survey respondents expressed a particular concern that PDA would negatively impact upon this important feature of long-term studies because negotiations take place among study participants before the onset of new research areas (such as MSc and PhD thesis or postdoctoral research projects) to avoid overlap. Such planning is undermined if outsiders are entirely free to work with available data from long-term studies without taking ongoing and planned analyses by insiders into account. The risk is especially strong for PhD students because part of their training involves courses, and they need more time to complete the research project and publish papers than do senior researchers.

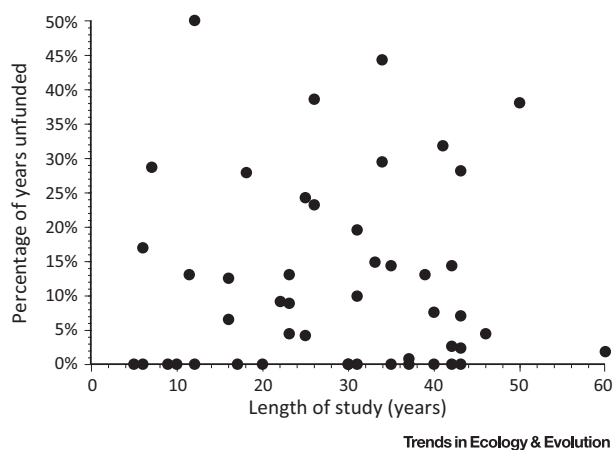


Figure 2. Duration of the Study and the Percentage of Years Unfunded.

Lausanne, Switzerland

⁴⁹Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Science, University of Nevada Reno, Reno NV 89512, USA

⁵⁰Department of Ecology and Natural Resource Management, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, PO Box 5003, 1432 Ås, and Norway and Norwegian Institute for Nature Research, PO Box 5685 Sluppen, 7485 Trondheim, Norway

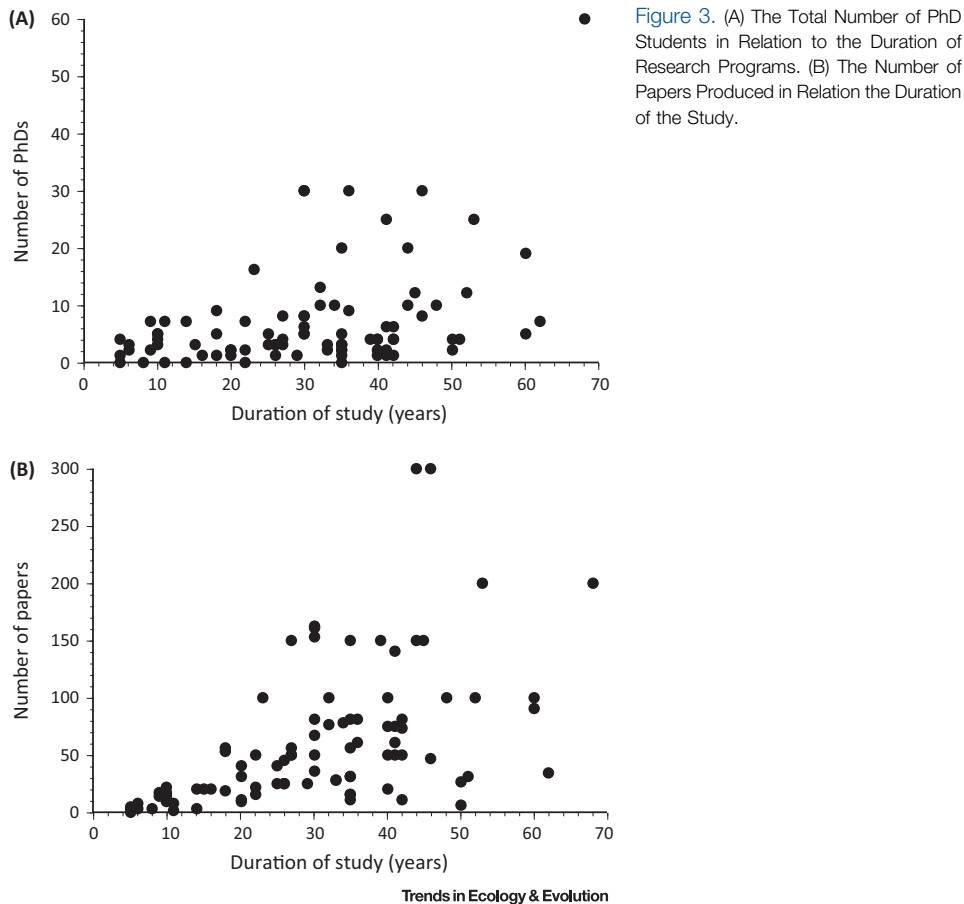
⁵¹Department of Biology, Center for Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, USA

⁵²Centre for Ecology and Conservation, College of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Exeter, Cornwall Campus, Penryn TR10 9EZ, UK

⁵³Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of Environmental and Health Studies, Telemark University College, 3800 Bo i Telemark, Norway

*Correspondence: dmills@stny.rr.com (J.A. Mills), teplitsky@mnhn.fr (C. Teplitsky).

#J.A.M. and C.T. contributed equally.



Possible Solutions

The verification of results is a very important requirement by journals; however, the costs of mandatory archiving of data by ongoing long-term projects could outweigh the expected benefits. Having imposed a requirement for PDA, journals are asking researchers to give up rights to what many consider to be their intellectual property. In fact, some scientists are considering copywriting their data. Journals are rightly vigilant in combating plagiarism and copyright infringement; it would be appropriate for journals to be equally vigilant in respecting and protecting the scientists' data.

A resolution to this conflict would benefit scientific progress; high-quality long-term studies have been responsible for a disproportionate number of publications in journals with the highest impact factors [10]. Many of the 5378 papers from 90 studies in this survey (Figure 3B) were published in prestigious journals that now require PDA. To initiate a discussion about how resolution might be achieved, we suggest six potential solutions.

Promoting Collaboration

Opportunities for collaboration that provide added-value to science and communication between data generators and potential users should be encouraged [5] rather than compulsory archiving. Most survey respondents see collaborations as the most satisfactory route to data

sharing. For substantial requests, the original researcher can expect and deserve coauthorship. To promote better use of data and collaboration with PIs, a website could be created referencing long-term studies with information such as species, duration of study, location, traits measured, and protocols used.

Providing Primary Data on a Confidential Basis

A solution that would satisfy most PIs would be to provide tabulated summary data initially, and if those data were insufficient for editors to evaluate a submitted paper, primary data could be provided on a confidential basis. After the review process, the data could be destroyed and would not be available to be used for any other purpose. Once the paper is published, people who want to use the data could contact the PIs of the long-term study for additional data. As the survey has shown, 93% of the respondents have indicated that they have supplied data on request. For example, researchers have used summary data from the 40 year study on Darwin's finches [44,58] by Peter and Rosemary Grant which was deposited in Dryad, and raw data have been supplied to four others upon request.

Providing a Longer Embargo

Some journals have indicated a willingness to embargo the data for a period of 1–5 years from publication, allowing the original researcher time to complete any related papers. This can reduce concerns in the case of smaller datasets from which only a limited number of questions can be answered. However, this is unlikely to solve the problem for long-term datasets, from which many questions can be addressed from different perspectives and over differing lengths of time.

For active long-term studies (i.e., with ongoing data collection) a minimum of 10–15 years might be considered more appropriate [5]. By comparison, pharmaceutical companies have a 20 year patent to recoup their investment. A similar argument could be made for the decades of research by long-term project scientists [McGlynn, T. (2014) I own my data, until I don't. <http://smallpondscience.com/2014/03/03/i-own-my-data-until-i-dont/>]. Furthermore, a longer embargo would encourage data users to contact the PIs for rapid access to the most up-to-date version of the database, thereby encouraging collaboration. For non-active studies where data collection has ended, the case for an earlier release is stronger.

Depositing Data on Institutional Servers

Centralizing the data in a single database in one location will prevent fragmentation of data on different archiving sites and ensure that the data are completely secure and up to date. Data could be archived on institutional servers, and the institution and its staff could control access and determine if collaboration is appropriate. An example of an effective approach to the management of archived data held by institutions is practiced by The Netherlands Institute of Ecology where people can request the data, and data extraction is carried out by members of the Institute, provided that the applicant will use the data for a well-described project, commit to not sharing the data with others, and offer coauthorship to the collector if the data forms an essential part of the publication. Another example of effective use of institutional servers is the Archibold Biological Station in Florida. Such institutional databases also allow the preservation of data and their accessibility after the PI retires [10].

Increasing Notification and Communication

If online archiving should be preferred for the physical safety of data, two improvements to present practices could be made. First, as the survey demonstrated, PIs are concerned with inappropriate use of data and overlap with ongoing or future projects of their own. A clear policy should be implemented by journals concerning conflicts of interest between the researchers collecting and organizing the data, and those who would use the data. For example, there are

currently no binding protocols or codes of conduct covering the presentation of, or access to, complex data that underpin analyses in publications. A process with guidelines should be established by journals to ensure that PIs are aware of potential studies and are satisfied with a paper based on the data they generated before the review process.

A possibility would be to implement data-tracking, allowing data collectors to obtain information on who is using the data and why. For example, any request for data to the Climate Change, Agriculture, and Food Security Data Portal triggers an email to be sent to the PI who deposited the data. Journals should have a rule that no paper is considered where the data users have not corresponded with the data owners and included appropriate acknowledgement of the source of the data within the paper. A rule set by journals would have a great deal of clout with data users. Data tracking would also allow the PI to be systematically asked to review papers based on their data. Another option would be to send an email to the PI every year asking whether they wish the data to be private or open access.

Concluding Remarks

Long-term studies currently generate science with high impact in all major fields of biology. These longitudinal studies began during an era when PDA did not exist. Although we agree that it is essential to archive data so that they are not lost to science, a key concern is that recently introduced data-archiving regimes combined with difficulty in obtaining continuous financial support will be a disincentive both for the initiation of long-term studies, and for maintenance of ongoing studies. It would be appropriate for journals and data-archiving institutions to enter into a dialog with researchers about how best to meet the objectives of data archiving while allowing valuable long-term studies to thrive.

Specifically, we recommend the development of a formal code of conduct which respects the data generated through long-term studies, and (i) allow tabulated summaries to be provided in the first instance backed up by the confidential submission of primary data if required by editors, (ii) encourage collaborative research with the data collector by people wishing to use the data, (iii) extend embargoes on the use of archived data [5], (iv) consider allowing archiving on institutional servers rather than open-access servers, and (v) develop enforceable procedures that enable the researcher to be contacted when someone wishes to access primary data. Through these modifications, a compromise could be crafted that provides an advantage to the scientific community, journals, and researchers generating long-term data, as well as benefiting science.

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Outstanding Questions

How long can long-term studies continue to flourish with a requirement to publicly archive data? Providing public access to the data disadvantages those who invest time and resources in the collection and maintenance of long-term data.

Will journals and scientists with long-term studies be able to develop and implement an approach to data archiving that is acceptable to both? Collaboration, longer embargo and a code of ethics on data usage are components of a potential solution.

What are the implications of copyrighting long-term datasets? Copyrighting their datasets would allow scientists to protect their intellectual property in the same way that journals protect their publications.

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