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Good Read: Motivating Data Publication

- John Porter (VCR)

Mark J. Costello, in his paper in the May 2009 issue of BioScience addresses “Motivating Online Publication of Data” outlines the challenges and opportunities associated with sharing environmental data in an international context (BioScience 59:418-427. <http://www.bioone.org/doi/abs/10.1525/bio.2009.59.5.9>).

The article addresses the benefits and costs of data publication for the scientist, and the value of publication of data for science in general. It includes a full-page box detailing (with responses) reasons scientists have given for not making data available, that should be very useful for LTER Information Managers (who have been known to hear similar reasoning from some local sources). A central thesis is that many of the reasons given for not publishing data are equally valid for conventional publications (you can’t control the use someone makes of ideas you put forth in a paper, any more than you can control what users will do with published data). As he puts it “The only valid reasons for scientists not to publish their data online are the same as for not publishing in print media – namely, that the data are of such poor quality that they could have no useful purpose, scientists lack the competence or time-management skills required to prepare data for publication, or publication is not a priority in the scientists’ work or career.”

His prescription for fostering data publication includes the need to for peer review, for journals to play a role in requiring data publication, development of citation standards and the inclusion of citations in publication metrics, and the role of funders in requiring data publication. He notes that the culture of science is being increasingly changed by the Internet (interestingly, BioScience now includes DOI’s directly in the title of downloadable citations), and that publication of data is an idea whose time has come!