# Associate Editor's Note.

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# Letters

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**Associate Editor's note.—**The following letter and rebuttal focus on an article recently published in *The Auk* on the utility of stable hydrogen isotopes for quantifying migratory connectivity (Auk 126:41–46). The review and editing of these letters have raised two issues that I would like to address on behalf of *The Auk*. I am grateful to both groups of authors for agreeing to focus their letters on the substantive scientific debate surrounding the use of stable isotopes in avian ecology and allowing me to address procedural issues.

The first issue centers on laboratory names. In their letter, Wunder et al. decry the absence of laboratory names in Smith et al.'s article. *The Auk* acknowledges its role in recommending to Smith et al. that they remove the laboratory names from their manuscript. The suggestion was made by one of the reviewers and supported by the editorial staff. The intent was to protect the reputations of labs involved in the study, given the strongly critical nature of the article. In retrospect, this was an unfortunate decision on our part, as it limits two hallmarks of the scientific process: transparency and accountability. In their rebuttal to Wunder et al.'s letter, Smith et al. provide the laboratory names.

The second, more serious, issue that has arisen during the handling of Smith et al.'s article and the resulting letters is conflict of interest (COI) and how to minimize both the potential for and the appearance of COI during the manuscript review process. Smith et al. requested that Editor Sealy not be involved in handling the review and editing of the following two letters because of his close professional relationship with one of the first letter's authors. Dr. Sealy acceded to that request, resulting in my sole handling of the letters and their peer review. I was not involved in the handling of the original article in question, nor do I have close professional ties with any of the authors or labs involved. Several potential COI issues also arose during the handling of Smith et al.'s original submission that I would like to take the time to address.

Upon submission of the original manuscript, the only authors were Adam Smith and Casey Lott. Smith is a former M.S. student of Associate Editor Dufty's who graduated in 2006. Given that Smith was no longer associated with Boise State University, that his career was well under way, and that a substantial amount of time had passed since Smith had been a part of AE Dufty's lab, Dufty did not hesitate to process the paper. Dufty had co-authored a paper with Smith and Lott and several others that had been rejected the previous year by *Oecologia*. Although the subject matter of the manuscripts submitted to *The Auk* and *Oecologia* was similar, the former was about half the length of the latter and the writing differed. Given the differences in length, style, and authorship, Dufty concluded that Smith and Lott had written a new paper.

The review process was uneventful. The manuscript was accepted after the third version, except for final polishing. Near the end of the review process the authors informed Dufty that they would like to add co-authors to the paper, individuals who had contributed feathers used in the analyses. Dufty recognized the names of the additional authors as those from the *Oecologia* paper, at which point he contacted the Editor and informed him of the situation. He volunteered to recuse himself, to pass the paper on to a different associate editor, and to have the review process begin anew. Editor Sealy determined the paper had received fair and unbiased reviews and that Dufty's recommendations based on these reviews were appropriate. The review process ended shortly thereafter and the paper was published with the expanded list of authors. After carefully reviewing the scientific qualifications of the four individuals who reviewed either the original manuscript or the following letter and rebuttal, I can state that these individuals were qualified to provide meaningful and constructive reviews and that the content of their reviews was faithfully transferred to Smith et al. for consideration. In addition, I can confirm that none of the four reviewers violated COI with respect to either set of authors.—Jason Jones, *Tetra Tech EC, 133 Federal Street, 6th floor, Boston, Massachusetts 02110, USA. E-mail: jason.jones@tetratech.com*

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