



## COMMENT

# Celebrating 15 years of *The ISME Journal*

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*The ISME Journal* (2023) 17:950–951; <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41396-023-01413-0>

Given the rapidly changing landscape of microbial ecology over the past 15 years, it seems appropriate to have some reflection on how *The ISME Journal* has progressed over the past decade-and-a-half, so as the journal's founding editors, we would like to share some of our perspectives.

It seems hard to believe that 15 years have passed since the first issue of *The ISME Journal* rolled off the presses—yes, it was actually printed at that time, and we both still have the full complement of *The ISME Journal* back issues from the first several years of publication in the bookcase. What a contrast between then and now. Not only in terms of living more in a digital world, but also with respect to the importance of microbial ecology for science and society, and the popularity of *The ISME Journal*. When we first started *The ISME Journal*, we had to convince people, let us not call it begging, to consider *The ISME Journal* for the publication of their best work. That initial trust built the foundation for a vibrant and successful journal. The strength of *The ISME Journal* has always been the tremendous quality of the submissions it receives. Another thing that has not changed is the explicit focus on ecology. The focus has always been on publishing interesting, novel, and complete ecological stories that advance the field. Although *The ISME Journal* has published a number of exciting and well-cited papers related to methodology, the focus has never been on fancy techniques but rather on how recent technical advances can best be implemented toward answering important scientific questions.

There are many people to thank for the success and development of *The ISME Journal*, and the editors, Editorial Board members, and all the reviewers deserve special thanks. The efforts of Ian Head and Kazuya Watanabe cannot be overestimated in helping *The ISME Journal* to mature and grow. We are also proud of the fact that ISME now also publishes a second journal, *ISME Communications*. It became clear that many more high-quality manuscripts were being submitted to *The ISME Journal* than could be accommodated and that many of these papers rapidly found their way into other publication venues. With quality in mind and a desire to serve a broader range of the microbial ecology community, *ISME Communications* is a welcome addition, and a journal that ISME can be extremely proud of for many years to come. It is also great to see the level of direct submissions to *ISME Communications*, offering further evidence that it is a flourishing journal in its own right.

It is also extremely exciting to see that the field of microbial ecology is rapidly growing in importance and visibility. At the time of *The ISME Journal*'s inception, there were only a handful of

journals publishing research in microbial ecology. This tremendous growth in the number of publication venues for microbial ecology is certainly not a simple dilution effect where a lower bar allows for a greater volume to be published. Rather, it is the product of a research field that is booming. The relevance of microbial ecology is becoming more commonly realized across numerous fields, making research and publications in microbial ecology more important and broadly disseminated. In the early years of *The ISME Journal*, we sometimes had worries when a new journal was launched in microbial ecology—what will this mean for the popularity and impact of *The ISME Journal*? We no longer have such worries. Adding journals in a growing field of research is logical and eventually serves the whole of the research community.

Of course, with the rapid advances in the field, the nature of the most popular papers in *The ISME Journal* has shifted over the years. Early publications often sought to use the newly emerging omics toolbox to examine complex microbial communities, at first mostly focusing on community structure, and later zooming in on functions. While some of the most commonly cited manuscripts in *The ISME Journal* are related to the approaches used to interrogate such complex communities, it is again important to keep the focus on how these new approaches can be used to answer new questions and address problems that were previously inaccessible, as opposed to just answering the same questions with larger datasets. In recent years, our arsenal of approaches and techniques continues to expand, providing more insight into microbial functions, individual interactions, and evolutionary histories. We have moved from single tag sequences to recovering genomes directly from the environment, from assays of community or population activities to individual cell metabolism, and most importantly, from descriptive studies to theory-based experimental design and data-informed modeling. And as we move into the future, the *ISME* philosophy will no doubt remain the same—what questions and concepts can I now address that were previously not tractable, and what new insights can be gained, which would have otherwise not come to light?

It is also comforting and exciting to see that *The ISME Journal* is moving boldly into the future. The current editors have provided a tremendous impulse of professionalism to the journal, greatly increasing efficiency and visibility, keeping the journal fresh and at the forefront of the field. With this team in place, and the support of the microbial ecology community, *The ISME Journal* is poised to continue on its successful journey. We hope you enjoy reading through these *The ISME Journal* highlights of the past 15 years,

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Received: 22 March 2023 Revised: 27 March 2023 Accepted: 5 April 2023

Published online: 12 April 2023

and, like you, we look forward to reading many new and exciting highlights in the future.

#### **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

GAK and MJB conceived the idea for this commentary and wrote and edited the text.

#### **COMPETING INTERESTS**

The authors declare no competing interests.

#### **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

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