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Letter to the Editor

Dear Sir:

Subject: NSERC Peer Review — A Delicate Balance or Increasing Entropy?

In Volume 14 of *Geoscience Canada*, Professor Michael Church reflects on the mythology of various modes of research publication in the Earth Sciences, as well as how these publications are "valued" by the NSERC peer review system. Clearly it would be foolish to do other than agree with Professor Church that all peer review systems *must* concentrate on quality, not retreat into quantitative measures of how much was produced, nor assign "value" to the publication route to the exclusion of publication content.

How does the NSERC peer review system in earth sciences (ES) function? One of NSERC's responsibilities is to monitor the quality of peer review, being sensitive to the special characteristics of a discipline and the broad spectrum of research areas that must be reviewed by a single committee. Overall, the current ES Grant Selection Committee [ESGSC] peer review is judged to be extraordinarily strong and effective. Committee discussion centres around the significance of previous contributions, the overall level of research activity and the potential for future advances. The following passage extracted from this year's report of the [ES]GSC is witness to the committee's recognition that quality must be the central concern in an evaluation.

> "The committee continued to evaluate publication records in a thoughtful fashion, not relying simply on numbers of publications in refereed journals, but instead assessing the quality of the publications and their contribution to science. The Committee continues to demand regular and consistent dissemination of results, but is realistic and careful in allowing for the varying demands and rates of publication among the various subdisciplines as well as differences in the preferred publication venues (journals, monographs, conference proceedings, maps, etc.). The perception that exists within some parts of the earth science community that this is not the case represents both a failure in communication by the ESGSC and the innocence of some members of the community."

Can the peer review system be strengthened further? The answer must be "yes"; however in Earth Sciences such changes would be refinements, not major changes in philosophy or approach. The strength of this peer review process is that it is dynamic, aware of community needs and aspirations and continually searching for more insight, yet prepared to make the difficult subjective judgements demanded by NSERC. The committee works within tight budgetary constraints given by NSERC. This, coupled with the high quality of Canadian researchers competing for the limited funds makes for a tough decision making process. While such a process cannot please all, it is a pity that the public debate does not include a few more of the many supporters. Enough bricks; pass the flowers!

Yours sincerely,

Janet E. Halliwell
Director (Research Grants)
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