The challenges of sharing scientific knowledge

Scientific knowledge is said to double every five years or so, but according to the authors of Open Science, up to half of all published scientific papers are read only by their authors, editors and reviewers, and 90 per cent are never cited by anyone else.

Cribb and Sari believe that unless we learn to share the scientific and technical knowledge that already exists, we will be ill-equipped to confront the key issues confronting humanity in the 21st century: resource scarcity, the food crisis, climate change, pollution, pandemic disease and poverty.

‘A vast gap has opened between the creation and the sharing of knowledge,’ the book argues. ‘Because of this, a significant part of the world scientific effort is effectively stillborn or fails to achieve its potential. The intellectual effort, time, money and human genius that is invested in research is lost because of a failure to effectively transmit the fruits of science to the people and places where it is most needed.’

The publication of Open Science coincides with the release of Inspiring Australia: A national strategy for engagement with the sciences, a high-level overview of the state of science communication in Australia undertaken by the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research. This report found that while well-intentioned, many Australian science organisations need to do better at communicating with the public, and advocates conferences, travelling exhibitions, prizes and briefings for science ambassadors – people with the capacity to draw international attention to Australian scientific achievement.

Cribb and Sari go further, providing a practical guide to communicating science, describing low-cost, effective ways of transferring knowledge to industry, government and the public. The book offers useful advice on good science writing, developing communication and media plans, understanding the audience, measuring performance, and managing crises and complex issues for a range of audiences.

Open Science is a much-needed, how-to manual for both organisations and individual researchers, advising them on how to use all available forms of communication to get their message out and into the hands of those who need it most.

Rachel Sullivan

Obituary

Wild man’s dedication led environmental publishing

Ecos marks, with great sadness, the passing of Chris Baxter OAM, an inspirational Australian, who served as a vital member of the Editorial Advisory Committee from 2006 to 2008.

Despite battling cancer on different fronts, Chris chose to reach out and provide Ecos with his invaluable wisdom as a successful independent magazine publisher-editor and an environmentalist. We are indebted to him.

Chris became known internationally for his tenacious ‘first-time’ rock-climbing and bushwalking feats, which led to him publishing Rock in Victoria. But it was establishing Wild magazine, with chance bushwalking friends Brian Walters and Michael Collie in 1981, that provided an avenue by which his first-hand experience of the preciousness of nature – and his determination to raise our awareness of it – could be enjoyed by millions of readers. Chris was awarded an Order of Australia Medal for this dedication.

His magazines now live on, firmly loved and relied on by the outdoors community because they espouse common-sense responsibility for the protection of the wild places that uplift our souls and sustain diversity.

Brian Walters described his publishing relationship with Chris as the most creative period of his life and pointed out that Wild’s launch coincided with Tasmania’s pivotal Franklin Dam controversy. He said Chris’s vision for Wild was that it should celebrate Australia’s wild places and provide positive information on important environmental issues, while at the same time steering clear of the minutiae of political controversy. Wild’s ‘Green Pages’, particularly, continue that job today.

‘Wild was an important innovation,’ Mr Walters wrote in the magazine. ‘It has been a consistent voice for the protection of our wild places from the ravages of those who would spoil it for the sake of a dollar.’

The words of Chris’s wife Sue reflect the thoughts of all who knew him: ‘His spirit rests in the places we loved together.’

James Porteous