

To:

Graciela Rusch
Håkan Hytteborn
Christina Skarpe
Shombe Ntaraluka Hassan

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Concerning dispute on authorship

We refer to your letter of October 11th2011 concerning a complaint on the publication of an article by Shombe Ntaraluka Hassan in *Open Journal of Ecology*. You ask if the National Committee for Research Ethics in Science and Technology (NENT) can offer any advice on how to handle the dispute on authorship.

With reference to guidelines from the Committee on Publication Ethics and the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors, Graciela Rusch, Håkan Hytteborn and Christina Skarpe claim that this is a very serious case of professional misconduct. Hassan published the article "Influence of early dry season fires on primary production in western Serengeti grasslands, Tanzania" in *Open Journal of Ecology* earlier this year, with himself as the only author. Rusch, Hytteborn and Skarpe were Hassan's supervisors during his PhD-work at the Department of Biology, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). The paper he has now published is one of the chapters of his thesis "Effects of fire on large herbivores and their forage resources in Serengeti, Tanzania", which was co-authored by Rusch, Hytteborn and Skarpe. The supervisors claim that they were engaged in a revision of the manuscript in order to submit it for publication when Hassan, without any warning or consultation, submitted the paper. They initially claimed co-authorship of the paper, but now demand that the article is retracted. They have been in a dialogue with the editor of *Open Journal of Ecology*, but so far no sanctions have been imposed.

Hassan does not dispute that his earlier supervisors co-authored the corresponding chapter in his thesis, but offers a different version of the period leading up to the publication of the article, as he claims that he repeatedly tried to include them in the revisions of the manuscripts in the thesis since the end of 2007.

NENT considered the complaint on its meeting of November 10th, based on information sent to the committee by Rusch and Hytteborn, as well as Shombe Ntaraluka Hassan.

Criteria for rightful authorship

A majority in the committee presumes that the earlier supervisors were rightful co-authors of the corresponding chapter in Hassan's thesis, as this is well documented in the published dissertation. Based on this presumption, there is little doubt that they should have been consulted before Hassan decided to publish the article, and that they should have been included as co-authors. Based on this presumption, the majority in the committee finds therefore that Hassan did not follow standards for authorship and cooperation, as defined by *Guidelines for Research Ethics in Science and Technology*, point 8.

A minority in the committee points out, however, that no documentation of the supervisors' rightful co-authorship to the corresponding chapter in the thesis has been provided, since the list of authors in that chapter does not serve as an evidence for rightful authorship. Accordingly, there is no documentation that the supervisors contributed to the corresponding article in a way that rightfully designates them as co-authors according to national and international guidelines. It is pointed out that student supervision itself is not a valid criterion for claiming authorship in publications of the contents of a thesis.

Good publication practice entails cooperation

Good publication practice entails that the "...researcher clarifies the individual areas of responsibility in teamwork and clarifies the rules of co-authorship" (*Guidelines for Research Ethics in Science and Technology*, point 8b). Supervisors have a special responsibility due to their authority and role; more specifically they should act in students' best interests and not take advantage of their authority towards the students (*Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities*, point 33). It seems reasonable to presume that the publication of the article was far more important for former student, than for his supervisors, and accordingly Hassan claims that he repeatedly attempted to include them in his efforts to get it published, until he gave up. The supervisors, however offers a totally different version and claim that they invested considerable time in revisions of the manuscript, but that Hassan never replied when they contacted him about this. Overall, it is obvious that the communication and cooperation between the parties has been poor. It is, however, difficult to judge from the information provided, who is mostly to blame for this.

Advice on possible sanctions

The article has already been published, and it is therefore the responsibility of the journal editors to decide how to handle the dispute. A role for NENT in that context might be to provide some counsel regarding possible sanctions. Should the current authorship of the published article turn out not to reflect the factual circumstances, the committee advises that the journal editors should consider issuing a correction. NENT does not recommend that the article is retracted. Retraction is a very drastic tool that should be limited to cases of serious

research misconduct. Retraction guidelines developed by the Committee on Publication Ethics communicate the following:

“If there is no reason to doubt the validity of the findings or the reliability of data it is not appropriate to retract a publication solely on the grounds of an authorship dispute. In such cases, the journal editor should inform those involved in the dispute that s/he cannot adjudicate in such cases but will be willing to publish a correction to the author/contributor list if the authors/contributors (or the institutions) provide appropriate proof that such change is justified.” (<http://www.publicationethics.org/files/retraction%20guidelines.pdf>)

With kind regards


for Dag E. Helland
Chair NENT


Helene Ingierd
Director NENT