

Intro:

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Erin Larson:

I'm your podcast host, Erin Larson, and today I'm here with Dr. Ariel Shogren, who's a postdoc at Michigan State University and Dr. Jake Zwart, who's an NSF postdoc, hosted by the US Geological Survey. They're going to be talking to us about the Limnology and Oceanography WikiProject for a little bit.

Erin Larson:

So welcome to the podcast, both of you.

Jake Zwart:

Thank you.

Erin Larson:

Yeah, it's great to have you here. I was wondering if you could start out by maybe giving us a little bit of background on the Limnology and Oceanography WikiProject and how it came about.

Jake Zwart:

Yeah, sure. So the WikiProject Limnology & Oceanography is a group of Wikipedia editors whose goal is to improve the quality and quantity of aquatic information on Wikipedia. It was established in October 2018 at the most recent Eco-DAS Symposium, which was in Hawaii. Eco-DAS is an ecological dissertation in aquatic sciences. NSF funded project through ASLO. That's where about 40 early career scientists go and pitch ideas and projects and papers to work on collaboratively. This was one of the projects that got some traction and we'd been working on it ever since.

Jake Zwart:

So far we've hosted a couple of edit-a-thons and some editing in between. Edit-a-thon is just a concentrated effort of editing Wikipedia pages. We've had about 30 people contribute to aquatic Wikipedia pages and the vast majority of our editors have never edited Wikipedia before.

Jake Zwart:

Again, we are mostly young aquatic scientists, but we're trying to recruit some more senior aquatic scientists. They have a lot of knowledge that we can tap into and so far we've added about 40,000 words to aquatic-related Wikipedia pages. And the readership of the project is very large. It's almost 100,000 views every day. Yes. That's kind of the background of it.

Erin Larson:

I was wondering if you could maybe tell us just a little bit about what, I know you were sort of the one who originally brought that idea to Eco-DAS about doing the WikiProject and did you notice that there were maybe not that many great resources in the freshwater sciences and limnology and oceanography on Wikipedia? Was that sort of part of the impetus?

Jake Zwart:

Yeah, they are. Yep. That's part of it. I remember looking at the limnology Wikipedia page, it must have been in 2016 or 2017 and noticing it was about 400 words long and just being kind of embarrassed by it... And then also wanting to have a central location where like a bunch of information on aquatic sciences could be that's open and free for everybody.

Jake Zwart:

Wikipedia is great for that because it's the largest open access project in the world with over 300 languages and millions of pages and it's the fifth most visited website globally. Kind of a lack of aquatic information and also having the central repository was some of the inspiration we got from it.

Erin Larson:

And so for folks who might not have already been involved in editing Wikipedia or might be intimidated by it... I know I certainly was when I first started. Could you both tell us a little bit about what editing actually entails, how you go about editing a Wikipedia page and what a WikiProject actually is?

Jake Zwart:

Yeah, sure. So I think editing Wikipedia is easier than editing a Word document now. And Wikipedia has spent a lot of effort trying to lower the barrier for new editors and I think with great success. They have a lot of tools to help you find citations and images and all this other stuff for whatever topic that you're writing about.

Jake Zwart:

You can get more complex obviously, like if you've been editing for a long time and want to do some more code-based editing, then that's also available. But I think it's really easy to get started for editing if you're new to Wikipedia editing.

Arial Shogren:

There's a lot of point and shoot, point and click interaction with the Wikipedia editing page. So they make it very easy to add citations and to add sections. I think that was something that was surprising for me. I thought it would be more code-based like Jake was saying, but when you actually go into one of the views for editing it's very, very point and click. Yeah, really easy.

Erin Larson:

Yeah. That's awesome. I agree. I feel like it's a lot easier than I initially thought when I first started doing it. And do you feel like, I know that sometimes on Wikipedia, people might get worried about the fact that anyone can edit it. How does Wikipedia make sure that the information that's on there is accurate?

Jake Zwart:

There's a lot of algorithms that look for vandalism. I think it was... It used to be a big problem when Wikipedia was in its early days, but now there's stuff that gets flagged, stuff that gets automatically deleted if it's really obvious.

Jake Zwart:

Then there's also a lot of dedicated Wikipedians that volunteer their time that just monitor a lot of pages. And so most of the time if I'm watching a page, I'll get a notification if something has changed. I go to that page.... And most of the time when there has been vandalism, it's already been removed within minutes of that. I don't see it as a big problem anymore.

Jake Zwart:

Obviously, there are some pages that are more contentious than others, like climate change for example. But I would say that most of the pages are... You don't have to deal with that or worry about that very much.

Erin Larson:

So I was curious, so I know... Obviously the Limnology & Oceanography WikiProject, but for our audience, which is mostly folks involved with The Society for Freshwater Science. I was wondering if you could talk specifically about why freshwater scientists in particular might be interested in becoming part of this WikiProject.

Arial Shogren:

I think a big part of it was when Jake brought this to Eco-DAS, just simply googling something that I work on. Like if you could google hyporheic zone, the page was probably one paragraph long and hyporheic zones are people's entire dissertation. If there's a lot of information that we know as experts that we could translate then to someone who might be trying to figure out what a hyporheic zone is, either high school or someone who's trying to manage these systems. And ultimately Wikipedia pages are one of the first things that pop in when you google it.

Arial Shogren:

So I think from that perspective, it's really important to provide very complete readable information on these sorts of platforms because it is one of the first accessed websites. If you google something that you do, why not add to that knowledge because you have it in your brain, you might as well just type it out.

Jake Zwart:

Yeah. Just to add to that, I think as scientists, we're kind of in a position of privilege too of having all this knowledge. There's a lot of people that don't have the knowledge or access to a journal subscription or access to it through institutions and stuff. So I think it's kind of a little bit of a moral obligation to share this information with people that don't have access to it.

Jake Zwart:

Heading out to Arial's comments, too... I think there's also selfish reasons for editing Wikipedia... Either practicing your communication skills or just expanding your knowledge base of aquatic information. I know I've learned a lot about editing Wikipedia or just reading Wikipedia and so I think those are some other benefits that you can get out of editing.

Erin Larson:

Yeah, that's awesome. I read an article recently about using Wikipedia in the classroom, too as a teaching tool; like using editing it as a way for instructors to help their students learn about a particular topic.

Jake Zwart:

Another inspiration for that was actually Dr. Rebecca Barnes at Colorado College. She does exactly that where she has students add pages, I think specifically for Women in STEM. So many aquatic Women in STEM pages have been edited by her students. That's a really a very cool initiative there.

Erin Larson:

And hopefully maybe some of our listeners now have their interest piqued in learning more about editing. So I was wondering, I know there's a workshop that is going to be at the SFS Annual Meeting this year in Salt Lake and I was wondering if you could give us some details about that?

Arial Shogren:

Basically there's a workshop at SFS that will be on Sunday from 2-4, I believe, so bringing your computers. But it's just going to be a really informal workshop to go through how you set up an account to edit Wikipedia in relation to the WikiProject L&O, and then how you actually go in and edit each page. And then also going into some of the metrics of looking at page views and page improvement.

Arial Shogren:

This is all kind of in preparation for an edit-a-thon that we will be hosting at some point in June, which basically we're calling for people who want to edit Wikipedia for a couple of minutes to a couple of hours to contribute to this group virtual effort towards improving freshwater pages.

Erin Larson:

And the workshop is free, correct?

Arial Shogren:

Yep. It's totally free. And we don't have any cap on participants. So if you're willing to come sit for a little while and learn, we're more than happy to have you; or just find one of the L&O or Project L&O people who have been tweeting about it. A couple of us will be at SFS.

Arial Shogren:

If you're interested in learning more and don't want or can't come to the workshop on Sunday, I'm more than happy to talk to you about it and walk you through it, so it would take probably five minutes.

Erin Larson:

Awesome. That's awesome. Great. Thanks, Arial.

Erin Larson:

And so to sort of wrap up, I was wondering if you guys could talk briefly about the future goals and visions for the L&O, the Limnology & Oceanography WikiProject.

Jake Zwart:

Yeah, I think there are a few goals and visions that we have in mind. Some of them are short term, some are long term. I think short term, we were just kind of focused on recruiting more editors, either through the workshop, like Ariel said, or edit-a-thons. We'd also talked about some video tutorials that if you can't make it to a workshop or for whatever reason can't do it at that time, you can look into this video tutorial for help.

Jake Zwart:

I think I mentioned earlier that a lot of our editors are young. We would like to get some more senior researchers because they have a lot of knowledge, a lot of experience that they can add to some of these Wikipedia pages.

Jake Zwart:

Continuing edit-a-thons and workshops is also going to be a short-term priority I think. And then also some longer-term goals ... We're focused on the English Wikipedia right now, but there's 300 other Wikipedias, all these 300 languages connecting to those other either WikiProjects or pages and translating some of these pages is a longer term and a very lofty goal, but there's lot of work that can be done there.

Arial Shogren:

I think another aspect of this is we would love for other people to take this on and be a part of the project. If other people want to host workshops or do training exercises or just contribute on your own, we are more than happy to have you, so feel free to come join the WikiProject.

Erin Larson:

Thank you both. I will be sharing a link to the WikiProject and contact info for both of you in the show notes for the episode as well, so people can get in touch if they have questions and look through the WikiProject page to get a better sense of what it all entails.

Erin Larson:

Thank you to both of you for joining us today on the podcast. It's been a pleasure talking to you about the WikiProject.

Jake Zwart:

Yeah, Erin, that's great.

Epilogue:

You've been listening to the Making Waves podcast. For more info... For more info... For more info, please visit us online at the Society for Freshwater Science webpage. Tune in next time for another fresh idea in freshwater science.