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Baseline is 30years young

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Editorial

Baseline is 30 years young

In July, 1982, *Marine Pollution Bulletin* introduced a new section entitled “Baseline”, with the intent that it would provide, in the words of its founding editor, a “record of contamination levels” in both time and space. Baseline has been a continuing feature of our journal ever since, and this July 2012 issue presents an opportunity to celebrate its 30th anniversary.

Eric Hamilton was the first editor of Baseline, presenting his vision for the section in an editorial (Hamilton, 1982) which makes fascinating reading from a modern perspective 30 years on. Eric saw Baseline’s content as being “designed to be acceptable for computer storage”, a thought probably ahead of its time, especially given that papers in those days were largely all typewritten, and submitted by snail mail. The articles were to “consist of bare data together with accompanying text” and it was suggested that suitable media of interest for the reports would consist of waters, sediments and biota. Data quality was emphasized, although it was acknowledged that “some may be inaccurate but associated with high precision, and can therefore be useful when studying changes in concentration of a substance in time and space”. How times have changed in such a relatively short period.

Those initial Baseline papers were truly “bare bones” affairs. The first two, published in the July 1982 issue (Seeliger and Knak, 1982; Witkowski and Frazier, 1982) consisted of texts barely over 350 words. Each article included one table. Diagrams and references were at an absolute minimum, as were details of analytical methodology and quality assurance and quality control (QA/QC). Sample numbers were also minimal – just 5 in Seeliger and Knak’s (1982) paper on estuarine metal monitoring in southern Brazil, and 3 bone and one barnacle sample in Witkowski and Frazier’s (1982) report on heavy metals in sea turtles. Statistical analyses seemed to be unheard of.

Eric Hamilton’s main thrust for these short Baseline reports was summarized towards the end of his editorial, where he stated: “Many national organizations acknowledge a need for baseline data but, at present, systems do not exist whereby the quality of accepted data can be evaluated; hence, the value of any data retrieved from such data files is limited as it depends upon the quality of the inputs. Eventually it will be instructive to compare data accumulated in data files to determine whether or not acceptance of high quality data differs from that which has not been subject to some scrutiny; if no significant differences are observed, then the abbreviated approach to be used in this journal will have confirmed the validity of accepted practice, but at the same time will have reduced the mass of paper that scientists have to wade through in order to retrieve concise statements for the concentration and distribution of elements and compounds in the marine environment” (Hamilton, 1982). I do believe that time and tide has shown these fine sentiments to be sadly misplaced.

Eric continued as the Baseline editor until March 1992, when he was succeeded by Dave Phillips. Dave instituted a new format and content for Baseline (Phillips, 1992), building on Eric’s vision, notably by increasing the length of the contributions, widening the scope of the section to include ecological and other important topics (including the then developing science of ecotoxicology), and increasing the emphasis on QA/QC. The essential bases of today’s Baseline articles were laid during Dave’s tenure, including the lack of sections and subsections, the importance of tables, graphics and statistical analyses where appropriate, paper length, and the further encouragement of contributions from developing countries. Of course, the papers still arrived, were sent to reviewers, and were dispatched to the publishers by post – indeed, I can remember visiting Dave at his home, and seeing the pile of Baseline mail stacked beside the desk in his study awaiting action. Little did I realize that my turn would be next!

I inherited essentially the same system when I took over the editorship of Baseline in 2001 (Richardson, 2001), although by that time, the “final copy” of a paper usually arrived through the post on a floppy disk (remember those?). Considered the height of technology at the time, they would go the way of the dinosaurs within 2 years, as our publishers, Elsevier, embraced the internet and all its myriad possibilities (albeit with some pretty clunky software in the developmental phase). *Marine Pollution Bulletin* was used as one of Elsevier’s “trial” journals for internet handling of papers, and in next to no time, all papers were required to be uploaded, all reviewers were contacted online, and all publication details were handled by email.

The success of this enterprise changed the nature of the editorial role, not to mention the throughput of papers. It was, at this time, a conscious decision of Charles Sheppard and myself to increase the number of Baseline papers published, and to shift many of the papers dealing with monitoring of contaminants to the Baseline section. Consequently, the average number of Baseline papers per issue increased from 2 to 3 during Eric and Dave’s tenures, to 4 to 5 in my time (see Fig. 1). The number of Baseline papers has been steadily increasing in recent years, concomitant with the initiation of online submission and access, as well as rapid developments of scientific investigation in developing countries, with a bumper crop in 2011 (almost 6 papers per issue on average; Fig. 1). The trend appears to be continuing in 2012.

During my tenure as the Baseline editor, I have also initiated further changes. Notably, Baselines now have abstracts and keywords, in order to assist online readers in reviewing the content of papers through a first (and cost-free) access point (see Richardson, 2010). On an occasional basis, Baseline also publishes “Specials” – longer articles devoted to spatial and temporal monitoring (Richardson, 2003) which, unlike normal Baseline articles, have sections and subsections. In addition, I continue to encourage publications from

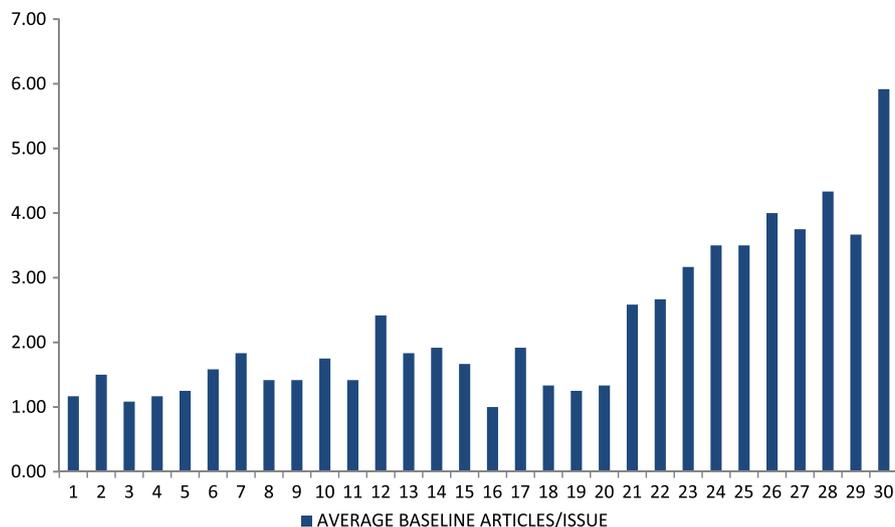


Fig. 1. Average number of Baseline articles published per issue on a yearly basis during the past 30 years. In the graph, “1” on the x-axis represents 1982; “30” represents 2011. Data were originally sourced from ScienceDirect®.

developing countries, as well as Baselines detailing new advances in areas which may be of increasing importance in the future, including plastic debris, ecological and ecotoxicological investigations, and emerging contaminants of concern.

For Baseline’s 30th anniversary, I have solicited 5 data review papers (the “Specials” I mentioned above) from authors around the world, which build on this important philosophy of spatial and temporal monitoring, a topic I have previously referred to as being the “Baseline’s logical conclusion” (Richardson, 2007). All the authors have been regular contributors to *Marine Pollution Bulletin*, and to the Baseline section, and thankfully embraced this idea, incorporating data from a variety of different localities and media. I thank them most sincerely for their efforts (not to mention meeting, for the most part, the deadlines imposed by me and Elsevier’s editorial system). These special anniversary papers are led by a contribution from Shinsuke Tanabe and Karri Ramu, detailing the importance of specimen banking and the results which can be achieved through such archiving. They make the important point that contaminant monitoring knows no regional boundaries, and as a result, specimen banking has become an area of increasing importance globally. Mark Mallory and Birgit Braune have contributed a review of contaminants in Arctic seabirds, which again emphasizes the importance of specimen banking. Robin Law and his coauthors report on contaminants in cetaceans from UK waters during the period 1990–2008, based on the Cetacean Strandings Investigation Programme, importantly highlighting how certain “legacy” contaminants, such as PCBs, are still (and are likely to remain) compounds of concern. Karen Kennedy and her coauthors report on a 5 year programme of passive monitoring of photosystem II herbicides on the Great Barrier Reef in Australia – an area of considerable economic and conservation significance. Their paper also highlights the importance of extreme weather events on the distribution of these contaminants, as eastern Australia experienced an extremely wet year during 2010–2011. Finally, Victor Wepener reports on temporal monitoring activities along the coastlines of Southern Africa – a much more rarely reported area of the world, and one of growing political and economic significance.

So, happy birthday Baseline! On this special occasion, may I again extend my thanks, on behalf of all readers, to our past

editors; to the many, many scientists who have acted as reviewers of papers over the years; and of course, to our authors for their many and varied contributions. Sincere thanks are also due to Charles Sheppard, *Marine Pollution Bulletin’s* Editor in Chief, for his strong and ongoing support of Baseline. I would also be very remiss if I did not extend a big thank you to my wife, Anne, who patiently endures my mumbled excuses (“I just need to catch up on a few Baselines”) for spending hours at a time on a computer when sunshine and fun beckon elsewhere. And finally, many thanks to Elsevier, our publishers, for their role in the continuing success of our journal, with a special thanks to our Journal Manager, Sara Bebbington for her assistance in the timely handling of this issue’s papers, not to mention putting up with my risible excuses for the delays which occurred.

Here’s to the future, and long may Baseline continue be an important part of *Marine Pollution Bulletin!*

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