

## What Is Natural History?

This journal was first published as *The Journal of the Natural History Society of Siam* in 1914. It subsequently underwent a few name changes, but settled on its present name in 1947 which echoes the original. The Instructions for Contributors define the fields covered in the *NHB* as natural history, ecology, systematics, evolution, geology, conservation, and natural resource management.

Natural history is an old and venerable activity that deals with scientific observation and interpretation of the natural world around us. Early in the 20th century it was still carried out largely by non-professional people with the leisure to pursue their avocations in observing and collecting insects, frogs, birds, plants, etc. Many of these early naturalists had sufficient scientific inclination and discipline to properly catalogue their specimens and record their observations for publication. A group of such serious naturalists founded the Natural History Society of Siam in 1913 and the precursor of the *NHB*. The modern natural sciences are derived from natural history, which is the starting point for virtually all research activity in ecology, systematics, evolution, geology, etc. Conservation and resource management are applied fields based on natural history.

The boundaries of natural history are sometimes blurred and the field may grade into other sciences such as ethnology, archaeology, pharmacology, traditional medicine, and less scientific activities such as ecotourism, photography, art, and philosophy. It is the editor's job to determine where the boundaries are in determining what kinds of material are to be included in the *NHB*. At present, the *NHB* may publish papers that grade into other fields so long as the natural history is sound and the basic viewpoint is scientific.

In most tropical countries, there is still much work to be done in basic natural history, in inventorying species in conservation areas, mapping endangered species, clarifying taxonomic relationships, studying the distribution of disease vectors, etc. Good old-fashioned natural history is as important today as ever and always welcome as long as the authors' understanding of science is modern and their grasp of the literature is current. But it is clear that the scope of the *NHB* has expanded to cover the modern natural sciences. In fact, modern natural history supplements notebook and binoculars with electronic data recorders, optical rangefinders, radio transmitters, computerized databases, statistical software, scanning electron microscopes, protein electrophoresis, and DNA analyzers.

It is sometimes difficult to decide if a submitted paper is too scientific and beyond the realm of familiar nature for the readership of the *NHB*. The basic test is whether the questions being asked relate directly to living things or their environments in nature. Also, the overall subject and conclusions should not be completely beyond the appreciation of educated nonscientists which constitute most of the membership of the Society. Manuscripts are rigorously edited to improve exposition and clarity and to eliminate unnecessary jargon. This does not necessarily make all articles very interesting or entertaining; taxonomic descriptions are of little interest to most people. Even natural scientists usually only skim them or note their titles. Nevertheless, taxonomy is the foundation and framework of the science of natural history. The fact that the *NHB* continues to receive good taxonomic papers attests to the confidence scientists continue to have in our journal.

The *NHB* has achieved a level of status and respect that few other Thai scientific journals have, and scientists in academic institutions receive credit for promotion and advancement for publishing their research in our journal. The Thailand Research Fund, and the Biodiversity Research and Training Program in BIOTEC, consider the *NHB* to be an accredited outlet for publication of funded research. To achieve this a journal must be international in scope and availability, and be properly refereed and edited. Because of this submissions to the *NHB* have been increasing, and the scientific standard of papers is also increasing. The variety of research subjects published in the *NHB* will also increase. The review process is becoming more difficult and selective. The *NHB* is truly carrying out the mission of The Siam Society in “investigation and encouragement of the arts and sciences in relation to Thailand and neighbouring countries” (from the Rules of the Siam Society).

Still more difficult decisions concern where the boundary should be drawn between scientific conservation and natural resource management, and environmental advocacy. Environmentalists come in all stripes, qualifications, and levels of credibility. Unfortunately, there is no good general environmental magazine in Thailand in English, although the newspapers do a reasonably good job of covering environmental problems here. In order to help satisfy the need for a more activist environmental journal in the Society, the *NHB* is accepting more papers dealing with environmental problems. The “Commentary” section was created for opinionated articles that need to be distinguished from more objective scientific research. Even commentary-type articles must be based on facts as much as possible and must appeal to reason rather than emotion. The editor is the gate-keeper that tries to prevent inflated rhetoric, unsupported allegations, or politically-flavored material from entering. The Siam Society journals must maintain the credibility and respect they have taken nearly a century to earn. On the other hand, the journals should not be timid or shy away from controversial issues.

The editor would like to hear more from members on what the *NHB* should include. Is an article on human overpopulation within the scope of natural history? (Well, here it is anyway!) Is an article that rails against deforestation or dams appropriate for the *NHB*? Should we go after the problem of bad management or corruption? We would also like to publish more letters in the *NHB*; perhaps if there are more controversial articles there will be more letters. Above all, the editors and the Council would like you to feel that this is your journal, and that you feel more informed after reading it.

**Warren Y. Brockelman**