

EDITORIAL

## A Tip for Decolonising Ecology and Conservation: The English Language is not the Problem, But Look beyond it

Vinícius Londe\*

Independent Researcher, Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil

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Discussions about bias in publications in ecology and conservation towards authors from the Global North and the underrepresentation of authors from the Global South have increased recently. This underrepresentation is not novel, but the interest in such discrepancies has gained attention in social media and scientific journals. Renowned scientists (mainly from the North) have published in top ecology/conservation journals evidence that the number of submitted articles is greater than the number of accepted articles from the Global South <sup>[1]</sup>. The opposite is true for North American, European, and Oceanian authors, i.e., the percentage of accepted articles is greater than submitted ones <sup>[1]</sup>. In addition, not surprisingly, women are also highly underrepresented among the top-publishing ecologists <sup>[2]</sup>, especially those from the Global South.

Scientists believe that the English language is one of the main limitations preventing authors of the Global South from publishing in leading ecological and conservation journals. As English is the universal language in science, it is evident that native English speakers are privileged, and the others have to struggle for communicating their findings. I can say from my own experience and the experience of colleagues that non-English-speaking authors face much more difficulties in preparing, publishing, and divulging their studies. However, there is something subtle behind these difficulties that most studies do not account for; the origin of the problem. If we consider only countries where English is not the official language, will

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\*Corresponding Author:

Vinícius Londe,

Independent Researcher, Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil;

Email: [vlonde.ecologia@gmail.com](mailto:vlonde.ecologia@gmail.com)

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the number of ecology publications be similar among Northern and Southern countries?

To show that language *per se* is not the principal issue in publishing, I gathered data from the Scopus® database (www.scopus.com) for 47 non-native-English-speaking countries. I extracted the number of countries' ecology publications from two regions: Latin America (Global South,  $n = 20$ ) and the European Union (Global North,  $n = 27$ ). On the searching page, I defined two fields: "Affiliation country" (where I entered the country's name) and "Article title, Abstract, Keywords", where I entered "ecology". I set a date range from 2017 to 2019 to relate the results with the average Human Development Index (HDI) calculated for the same period. The HDI accounts for three dimensions of human development (life expectancy, education, and income per capita), providing helpful insights into human conditions (www.hdr.undp.org). I did fit Generalised Additive Models (GAM, cubic regression splines), considering the regions separately and together to check if publications in ecology depend on human development.

Unsurprisingly, we can see that publication in ecology increases with increasing HDI in both regions; however, the relationship is significant in European Union (Latin America:  $F = 1.57$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $P = 0.226$ ; European Union:  $F = 4.84$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $P = 0.037$ , Deviance explained = 16.2%)

(Figure 1). Non-native-English-speaking authors from countries with very high HDI ( $\geq 0.800$ ) have a higher lifespan, better education (including learning good quality English), and income per capita. On the other hand, authors from Latin American countries with medium and high HDI have access to lower quality education and have more difficulty conducting and publishing their studies. Indeed, there is strong evidence that the authors from European Union publish more than authors from Latin America (Wilcoxon test,  $W = 416$ ,  $P = 0.002$ ) (Figure 2). Therefore, the determining factor influencing the quantity (and quality) of publications in ecology is not just related to being a non-English speaker but the conditions in which scientists live.

Considering both regions together (not plotted here), there is moderate evidence that HDI is positively associated with the number of publications ( $F = 2.42$ ,  $df = 8.42$ ,  $P = 0.044$ , Deviance explained = 56.4%).

Taking Brazil as an example, English taught in public schools is so bad that students finishing high school cannot write, listen, and speak simple phrases (there are exceptions, of course). Thus, a person aiming to pursue a scientific career needs to do hard work not only to learn ecology, statistics, and programming but also to listen, speak, read, and write in English. Language can open great opportunities for young scientists, but it can be a

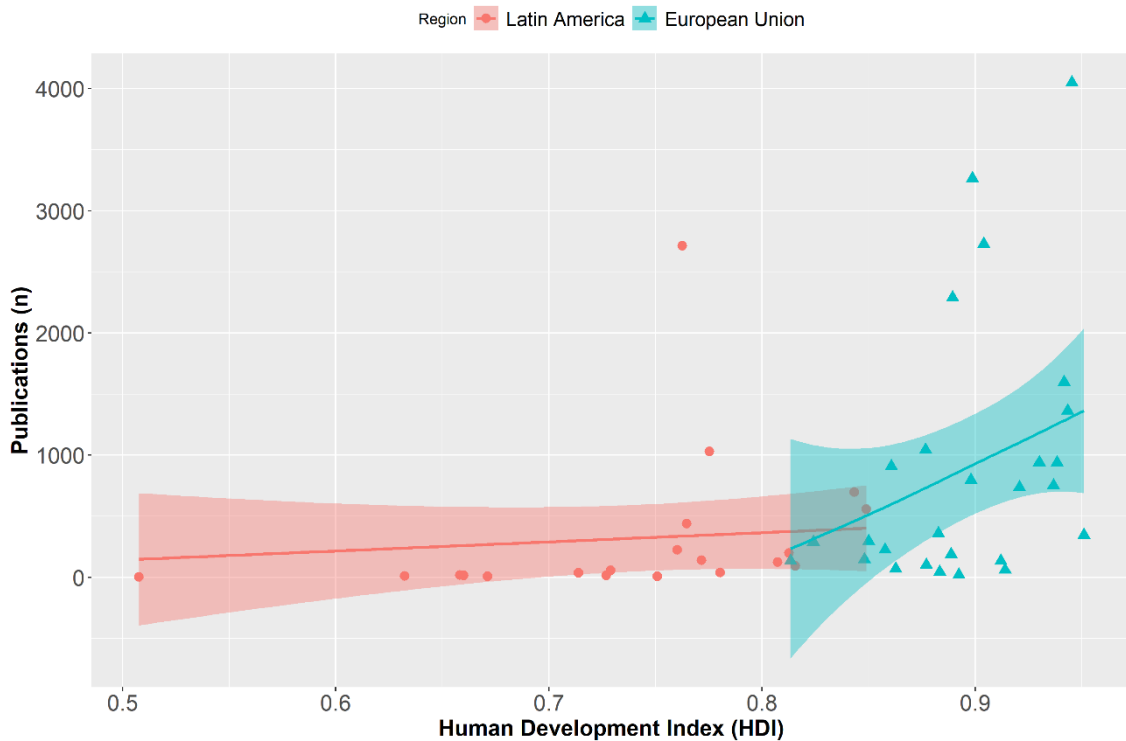
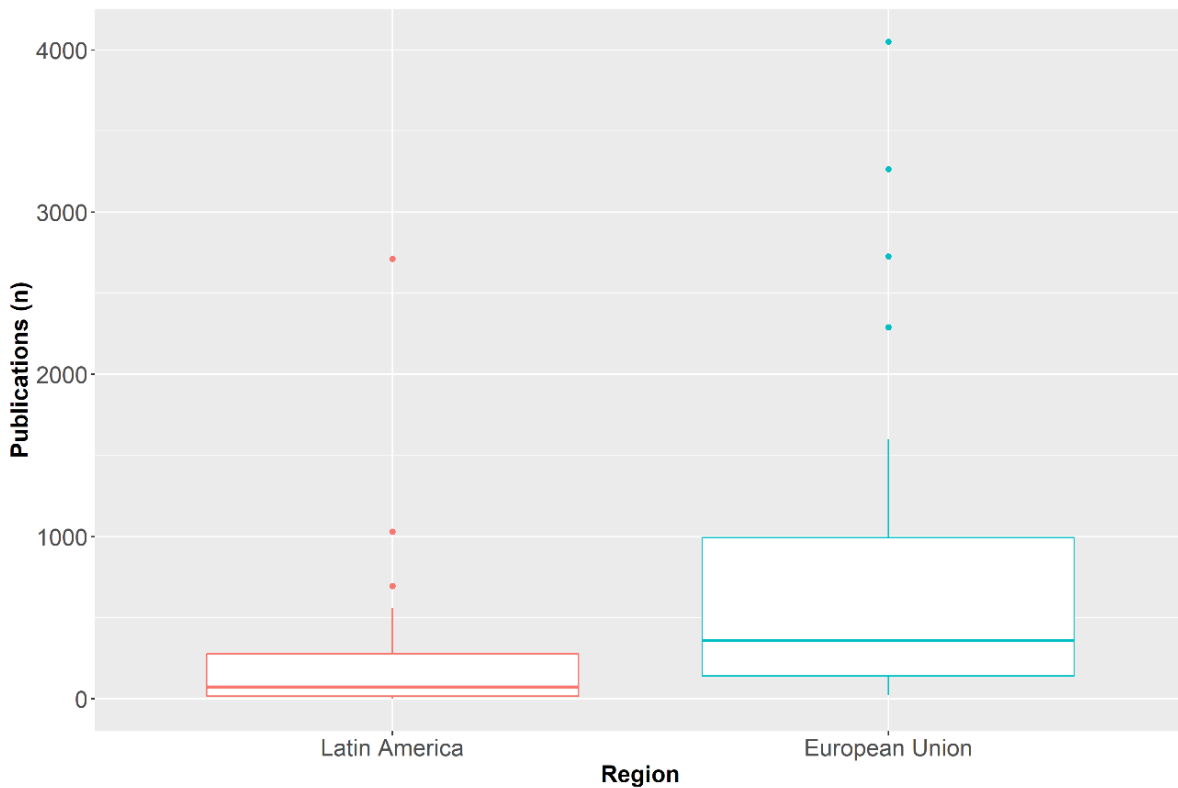


Figure 1. Number of documents published from 2017 to 2019 as a function of the average HDI for the same period.



**Figure 2.** Number of publications in ecology from Latin American and European Union authors from 2017 to 2019.

Note: English is not the official language in countries of both regions.

monster too. As well pointed out in a recent study in Colombia, a lack of proficiency in English prevents not only the publications of articles but also attending international conferences, meetings, and exchanges abroad [3]. These difficulties could be minimised if we had better live conditions, especially a good education.

The current debate about the dominance of English-speaking authors is timely and necessary. However, the global scientific community needs to understand that the main problem is not the language itself but the lack of structure and quality education in countries with medium and high HDI. When the editors of international journals receive manuscripts of authors from the Global South, especially those without collaboration with English-speaking scientists, they should know that these studies result from a lot of struggle and persistence. When authors from the Global North are contacted by those from the Global South, they should pay attention to those words and (at least) respond to their correspondences. Changes in personal and institutional structures are urgently needed to decolonise science. As shown in Figure 1, the authors from the Global South have great potential to contribute more with ecological knowledge, just give them an oppor-

tunity and adequate human conditions.

### Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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