



To: Susan Haig, AOU President-Elect  
From: Ruth Tingay, RRF President

16 November 2011

Dear Sue:

Thank you for inviting the Raptor Research Foundation to join the proposed Society for Ornithology, and for sending me the draft outline of your vision for reorganizing how professional ornithology is conducted in the Western Hemisphere. At our meeting in Duluth last month the RRF Board of Directors discussed your proposal. In this open letter I'd like to share with you and the OSNA community our perspectives and our decision.

First, it occurred to us that what you are proposing is not an invitation for RRF *as a group* to join a new society. Should the SFO become a reality, RRF members certainly would be free to join or not at their discretion. Rather, what you are proposing is that RRF disband so that a new SFO could be the exclusive representative for ornithology in the Western Hemisphere. I must say that that is an astounding request! However, because the RRF Board of Directors represents not only our society, but also the interests of our membership, we carefully considered whether disbanding and allowing a new SFO to be the sole representative of Western Hemisphere ornithologists would promote the mission of RRF. The following issues were discussed by our board.

### **Membership**

Declining memberships are of real concern to professional scientific societies. While the change in how peer-reviewed publications are disseminated (from paper to electronic) is one factor, it certainly is not the only reason for a lack of growth in new members and for non-renewals. We believe that to attract new members and to earn the renewal of current members, a society must not only give its members a first rate product, including an outstanding journal and a valuable and enjoyable experience at the annual meetings, but must also provide opportunities for the members to become personally involved in their chosen discipline. For example, under the current OSNA structure, each society has committees to address various areas of concern, such as avian conservation. Although redundant, having multiple committees addressing the same concerns increases the number of members who are able to contribute to the cause that draws them to our societies in the first place. Likewise, each society has its own governing board. We believe that consolidating several OSNA societies into one mega-society would greatly reduce the opportunities for members to be substantively involved.

Declining memberships in some OSNA societies seems to be a significant part of the rationale for forming a new society. However, after reviewing the Working Outline you provided, the RRF Board did not see a compelling argument on how a new society would solve that problem. At this stage the SFO proposal simply fails to make that case. In fact, a reduction in the number and diversity of societies available to potential members might very well exacerbate the membership problem.

## **Publications**

The RRF Board recognizes that one of the greatest strengths of professional ornithology is its peer-reviewed publications. Currently, the *Journal of Raptor Research* competes with the *Auk*, the *Wilson Journal of Ornithology*, the *Condor*, and the *Journal of Field Ornithology* for excellent papers. Each journal has its own niche, but importantly, each is independent. The SFO structure would consist of four new journals under a single editorial office. This single office would assume the authority to decide which papers would be “game changers” and be published in the top journal (*Frontiers in Ornithology*), and which would be second tier and published in *Advances in Ornithology*. The RRF Board rejects the concept of a tiered system; we don’t believe our readers need to be told which studies are most valuable to the field.

The SFO proposal also envisions two additional journals, one for descriptive studies and another for applied subjects, including conservation. RRF also rejects this approach, particularly the notion that conservation-oriented studies should be relegated to something other than the top-tier journal. We believe that readers are attracted to journals in part by the variety of papers they contain. Diversity within journals may be as important as the diversity among journals.

The RRF Board does not support the proposal to replace the current structure of five (or more) independent outlets for scholarly literature with a group of new journals under a single editorial office. We believe that the loss of diversity and independence may do great harm to the field of ornithology, and we urge the planners of the SFO to consider very carefully the potential consequences of such a restructuring.

## **Meetings**

RRF has a well-deserved reputation for its outstanding annual meetings. Being a relatively small society of 900-1000 members, our meetings attract a few hundred participants. There are many advantages to a smaller gathering, particularly the ease with which colleagues can spend “quality time” together. While RRF regularly joins with other OSNA societies every four years or so for the NAOC, there is significant reluctance to give up our more intimate meetings. Participation in a mega-meeting also is problematic in that it is difficult for smaller societies to maintain their unique identities. In particular, the logistics require that we forego a number of our valued traditions, such as the Andersen Award for best student paper. If the current program constraints we face with the NOAC-V meeting in Vancouver

are indicative of how SFO meetings would be organized, we feel that the disadvantages of these mega-meetings would outweigh their advantages.

### **Geographic Emphasis**

Finally, the SFO is being proposed as a new representative of Western Hemisphere ornithology. RRF takes great pride in being an international society. Our commitment to serving a global clientele is reflected in the structure of our Board of Directors. A focus on Western Hemisphere ornithology is not in RRF's interests.

In summary, there are substantial disadvantages for each area of concern and, frankly, no apparent benefit for dissolving RRF. Moreover, we have serious concerns about the development of a new ornithological society without a more transparent process that from the beginning involves formal representation from all of the OSNA societies. Consequently, the RRF Board of Directors has unanimously declined your request for RRF to disband and have its members join the Society for Ornithology.

Sincerely,

Ruth Tingay, President  
Raptor Research Foundation