

SHOULD THE ASIAN SOCIETY OF ARACHNOLOGY (ASA) LEVY A SUBSCRIPTION FEE?

SUBSCRIPTION FEES: WHY?

ASA website: Maintenance & improved services

Our current webmaster (Nicky Bay) designed and developed our website without charging the ASA a single cent, even though as an IT professional, he could have charged us a sizeable service fee.

Apart from his professional fees, Nicky personally absorbed all the initial expenses for software and hosting subscription.

His combined outlay could have accounted to close to US\$ 10,000 at current Singapore market rate.

After setting up the website, Nicky has continued to host, maintain, and update the web structures free of charge.

This *pro bono* arrangement is unfair to Nicky, and is unsustainable in the long term if and when Nicky is no longer available to support us.

Without funding, we cannot expect Nicky or any other webmaster to provide new and improved services through new software, design, and new programmes such as:

- a free and searchable database of non-taxonomic papers (e.g., on behaviour, ecology) similar to the WSC for taxonomic papers.
- electronic and accountable voting system — the current hybrid system (physical and email vote) is not robust, confidential, and fool-proofed.

Weeding out phantom members

If membership is free, it is theoretically possible for ASA Council candidates to canvass (real or phantom) supporters to register and vote for them.

By enforcing paid membership, it discourages the creation of numerous “phantom” accounts as there would be a high cost incurred.

Paid membership reduces the sudden surge of phantom members before each council election — thus making elections fairer and therefore more democratic.

Subsidies for low-income members

With funding, ASA will be able to provide travel grants to subsidise deserving low-income participants to attend ASA workshops or conferences.

SUBSCRIPTION FEES: ANTICIPATED PROBLEMS

“No incentive to pay”

We must develop some special privileges (apart from just voting rights) to incentivise paid membership.

The special benefits can include:

- access (via password) to a privileged, searchable database of non-taxonomic papers (e.g., on behaviour, ecology) similar to the WSC for taxonomic papers;
- access (via password) to a privileged “classroom” section where paid members can learn advanced, proprietary or innovative macrophotography, photomicroscopy, or other laboratory techniques;
- discounts in registration fees for workshops or international conferences;
- official certification of membership (for application of scholarship, admission to Ph.D programmes etc)

“Poor students and retirees cannot afford”

Affordability should not be a major issue provided that:

- the subscription is kept low;
- students enjoy a discounted rate.

The International Society of Arachnology and the American Arachnological Society have a system to waive subscription fees for members from developing countries.

However, as a general policy, it is not advisable to encourage free-riders using “poverty” as an excuse — especially if the subscription fee is kept at an affordable level.

Furthermore, we will unwittingly generate more work and controversies if the Council has to decide which members or countries can enjoy the waiver — as there is bound to be others will feel equally entitled to the free treatment.

If we decide to waive subscription, it is only fair and logical to restrict their voting and access to the privileged sections of the website.

We can still help selected poor students to attend workshops and international conferences through a transparent system of travel grants for deserving candidates once funding is available.

SUBSCRIPTION: HOW MUCH IS “AFFORDABLE”?

Appendix A shows a comparative study of subscriptions and privileges offered by arachnological societies globally.

Option A

We can maintain the *status quo*, but our website can be jeopardized, if not die a natural death, when the current webmaster is no longer able to provide *pro bono* services because of his growing professional commitments.

We can pursue this option only if we can find another committed and professionally competent webmaster who can maintain and develop the website at no cost to ASA.

However, past experiences have taught us that such optimism is unrealistic: there may be enthusiastic volunteers, but few can afford to devote time for the website and deliver the desired results within a stipulated timeframe. That is the reason why it had taken us a decade to establish today’s working website since we appointed a webmaster in 2014.

Option B

We can follow the Arachnological Society of China (ASC) which requires (“in theory”) regular members and student members to pay a token subscription of only RMB 50 (~US\$ 7.00) and RMB 20 (~US\$ 2.80) per year respectively to the Zoological Society of China (ZSC).

Paid members of the ASC and ZSC enjoy voting rights and receive simple e-bulletins, but they are not entitled to privileges such as free copies of the *Acta Arachnologica Sinica*, nor is there any access of privileged information (for members only) on the ZSC website. Furthermore, the ASC itself does not have a website.

With such a low membership fee, it is unrealistic for the ASA to build up financial muscles to implement the envisaged web improvements, or even to keep the website alive if our current webmaster cannot carry on because of his growing professional commitments.

Option C

We charge a fee, but below those societies offering free journals, but above those societies with free and low membership fees but can offer only minimal privileges to their members.

It is proposed that we levy a membership fee of US\$ 20 per year, with a student rate of US\$10 per year.

It is also proposed that we do not waive membership fees for “special cases” for “poor” students and retirees, or for specific “low-income” countries — for the reasons given in the earlier paragraphs.

Deserving cases can still be supported through travel grants when funding is available.

NEXT STEPS

If it is agreed that we should collect a subscription fee, then the following steps will be necessary:

Elect a treasurer

We will need to elect or appoint a treasurer to administer the funds collected from subscription (and donations).

See Discussion Paper II (under preparation) for the planned modality of such an election under the proposed ASA Constitution & By-laws.

Enact a constitution

We will also need to establish a bank account.

The prerequisites to open a bank account in rule-of-law countries such as Singapore include the need to register the ASA as a society.

To register a society, it will be necessary to enact an ASA Constitution — See Discussion Paper II.

Appendix B of this paper (in preparation) shows some of the administrative and legal requirements in establishing a bank account, and the modalities of payments from subscribers in and outside the country of registration.

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