Preface to Volumes 21–26

The ambitious venture of creating an Encyclopedia covering the whole of Life Sciences came to fruition in 2001 when *Nature Publishing Group* (*NPG*) launched the online version of the *Encyclopedia of Life Sciences* (*ELS*). This was followed in 2002 by the 20-volume print edition. Rave reviews followed from both academics and professional librarians, suggesting that *ELS* was a valuable asset to both students and researchers, filling a large vacuole in the increasingly specialized and complex academic literature. The aim (as discussed in the original preface by *NPG*) was to produce a single integrated, regularly updated, reference work to cover the whole of biology for both non-specialist and specialist user alike.

In 2004 *ELS* was acquired by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd from *NPG*. Since the acquisition, Wiley has been adding both new and updated articles to keep readers up to date with the relentlessly evolving nature of the life sciences, carefully commissioning in areas that have been particularly dynamic, on the advice of our specialist board of scientific editors.

The logistics of this task have, and continue to be, enormous. Approximately 3000 articles were printed in the original 20 volume work, covering biochemistry, cell biology, clinical medicine, developmental biology, ecology and evolution, genetics and molecular biology, immunology, microbiology, neuroscience, plant science, science and society, and structural biology. Since then, the sections have evolved to include genetics and disease, and comparative and functional morphology, and to exclude clinical medicine (it was felt that it was important to concentrate on *ELS*' core strength in the life sciences). Accordingly, in this six volume supplementary work we have published an additional 650 peer-reviewed articles, on topics that did not appear in the original print volume set.

Articles in *ELS* are divided into three different categories indicating their level of complexity: Introductory, Advanced and Keynote. **Introductory articles** have been written primarily for undergraduates and non-specialists requiring the basic concepts of a particular subject. **Advanced articles** provide a more detailed discussion of specialist subjects, equivalent to that found in graduate level texts. **Keynote articles** provide a platform for debate where controversial issues and 'hot topics' can be discussed.

It is well recognised that researchers and students habitually operate by searching electronically for one keyword related to their research. Consequently, this diminishes their overall general education across the life sciences as, unlike their predecessors, they often fail to browse articles outside their core area. *ELS* acts to counterbalance this perturbing state of affairs by providing a venue where authoritative, easily accessible articles from subjects as diverse as structural biology and ecology are located side by side.

By updating the original print set with these new articles, we ensure that students, researchers and teachers are kept informed of the latest advances across the life sciences in a single body of peer-reviewed work. We hope the *Encyclopedia of Life Sciences* will continue to be seen as *the* reference work for the life science community and that the interest and support from that community in creating a persistently evolving work of this magnitude will continue to flourish.

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