LETTER

Reference: Siegel-Causey, D. "Gastroliths assist digestion in shags" *Notornis*, 1990, 37:70–72.

Sir,

It is difficult to understand the relevance of a study on Patagonian Phalacrocoracidae, which had no more than a three out of four generic representation in the New Zealand *Checklist*. That science is not parochial one applauds but perhaps priorities should be applied to matters of local origin for encouragement to student and writer and local relevance for interest and value to the reader?

One might wonder why, if the Editor of *Notornis* has been offered exclusive publication of this piece, it was offered to a New Zealand journal 4000 kilometres from the field site and with tenuous local natural history connections? One might also wonder why it was offered to an obscure journal with a small circulation one third of a world away from the author's academic seat?

The conclusive scientific value of the paper is marginal. The 'Methods' section is incomplete and obscure; an author should either publish or make reference to methods that allows the work not only to be critically interpreted but repeated. What technological explanation is contained in "I collected diet samples from 364 birds of four species", and "examined. . contents of each bird . . obtained 184 food samples"? Taking into consideration Table 1, I interpret this to indicate that 364 birds were killed, with a 50% yield of material for analysis. If I have misinterpreted this author's methods, whilst I am pleased for the sake of the birds and his credibility, it serves to underline my remarks upon the adequacy of the presentation.

On the other hand, if my interpretation is correct, I am surprised that your journal's scientific and environmental ethics allow the publication of such devastation for such trivial outcome and value as this paper. If this paper has been offered exclusively to *Notornis*, it may be that this is why; the drive to publish from academic centres is well known and even understood but equally, their publishing organs commonly are restrained by an ethical reputation.

A.G.HOCKEN, *Whiterocks Road, 6–D RD, Oamaru, 14 May 1990.*

I am pleased that Mr A.G.Hocken took the trouble to read "Gastroliths assist digestion in shags" and found something of interest within upon which to comment. Mr Hocken apparently agrees with the scientific content of this note as he does not address that in his letter but is instead troubled by what would appear to be a shocking slaughter of birds for a handful of stomach stones. If that were the case, his outrage would be justified. It is not the case and his letter is moot.

He does bring up indirectly, however, the issue of scientific collection, which is a topic very pertinent and very appropriate for discussion by members of OSNZ and others who are concerned about conservation of the environment and preservation of its inhabitants.

Responsible scientific collection should need little justification; however, the excesses of the past have caused to be implemented stringent regulations on what may be collected, and when and where it shall be done. The days of shooting birds solely to collect food samples (or feather mites or whatever) are gone, forever I hope. Today, when birds are collected for scientific reasons, maximum use is made of each specimen. In this particular case, the cormorants collected in southern South America formed the basis for over ten separate studies (and about 30 publications) encompassing identification of breeding stocks, quantification of the genetic structure of breeding populations, studies on regional shifts in diet, of which the curious anomaly of gastroliths is a minor outcome.

Mr Hocken imputes the reputation of *Notornis* as obscure and of small circulation. While the society may wish for greater income from the journal (which society does not?), the impact of the journal reaches beyond the subscribers. Natural history observations form the basis for biological studies directed to organisms in their environment and *Notornis* plays an important role as a journal of record for Southern Hemisphere seabird biology. Herein are contained eyewitness accounts of breeding behavior, at-sea observations of distribution and abundance, faunal accounts of important breeding areas, etc. Most of the authors chose to publish their findings in *Notornis* because it seemed appropriate and not because it is easy.

Preservation of birds and conservation of their habitat is a continuing concern for naturalists and one that must proceed on a broad front. Our understanding of animals in their environment is facilitated by joint application of museum and field studies, by laboratory studies and field observations, and not the least, by amateurs and professionals alike.

DOUGLAS SIEGEL-CAUSEY, *Research Curator of Ornithology, Museum of Natural History, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045, 15 June 1990*