

## OPEN LETTER TO THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

I am writing this letter out of a profound responsibility to bring issues that transcend my personal and professional experience to light. The recent retractions of articles that I signed as a corresponding author have had a devastating impact not only on my scientific career but also on my personal life and on those around me – including my children, my family, students, and colleagues who trusted my work. These actions call into question the effort of years dedicated to research and teaching and reflect the fragility of a system that should guarantee justice, transparency, and impartiality in its decisions. I am not writing to accuse or disparage any institution or individual but to seek understanding and dialogue around a situation that I consider unfair and disproportionate, and that threatens the integrity of a body of scientific knowledge built with dedication and ethics. By sharing my perspective respectfully and honestly, I hope this letter will contribute to reflections that strengthen the values underpinning science.

1. On July 25 of this year, I was taken by surprise when I received a communication from the Elsevier Ethics Team alleging that the email addresses used for reviewers in 42 of my articles published in Science of the Total Environment (Stoten) did not belong to the reviewers indicated. According to the Elsevier Ethics Team, *“a number of the reviewer email addresses on these papers do not belong to the reviewers in question, meaning that the reviews in question are allegedly not genuine.”* The communication also established a strict deadline for my response: *“Please provide me a prompt and full response within 14 days.”* Furthermore, the Elsevier Ethics Team highlighted potential consequences depending on the nature of my response, stating: *“(…) I should also inform you that I may consider it necessary to inform and involve the research institutions at which the underlying research took place and the funding agency that supported the research. Please note that if we do not have an adequate and timely response, we may be forced to conclude that the allegations are truthful.”*

**Malafaia Concern regarding your articles published in STOTEN**

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Research Integrity and Publishing Ethics CoE <[REDACTED]@elsevier.com> 25 de julho de 2024 às 05:45  
Para: "guilherme [REDACTED]" <guilherme [REDACTED]>

25<sup>th</sup> of July 2024

Dear

Concern has been raised about the publication of your articles in the attached spreadsheet, for which you are the corresponding author. As the Publishing Ethics Analyst responsible for STOTEN, I must take seriously any allegation raised that if true would violate the journal's policies (set out in our ethical statements, instructions to authors, and the like).

The substance of the allegation is that a number of the reviewer email addresses on these papers do not belong to the reviewers in question, meaning that the reviews in question are allegedly not genuine. It is noted that you as the corresponding author suggested these reviewers in your submission (alongside the potentially incorrect email addresses). Despite being listed as reviewers for the papers, the individuals in question have confirmed that these email addresses do not belong to them.

If true, this would violate our policies.

Please provide me a prompt and full response within **14 days**.


Depending on the nature of your response, I should also inform you that I may consider it necessary to inform and involve the research institutions at which the underlying research took place, and the funding agency that supported the research.

Please note that if we do not have an adequate and timely response, we may be forced to conclude that the allegations are truthful.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

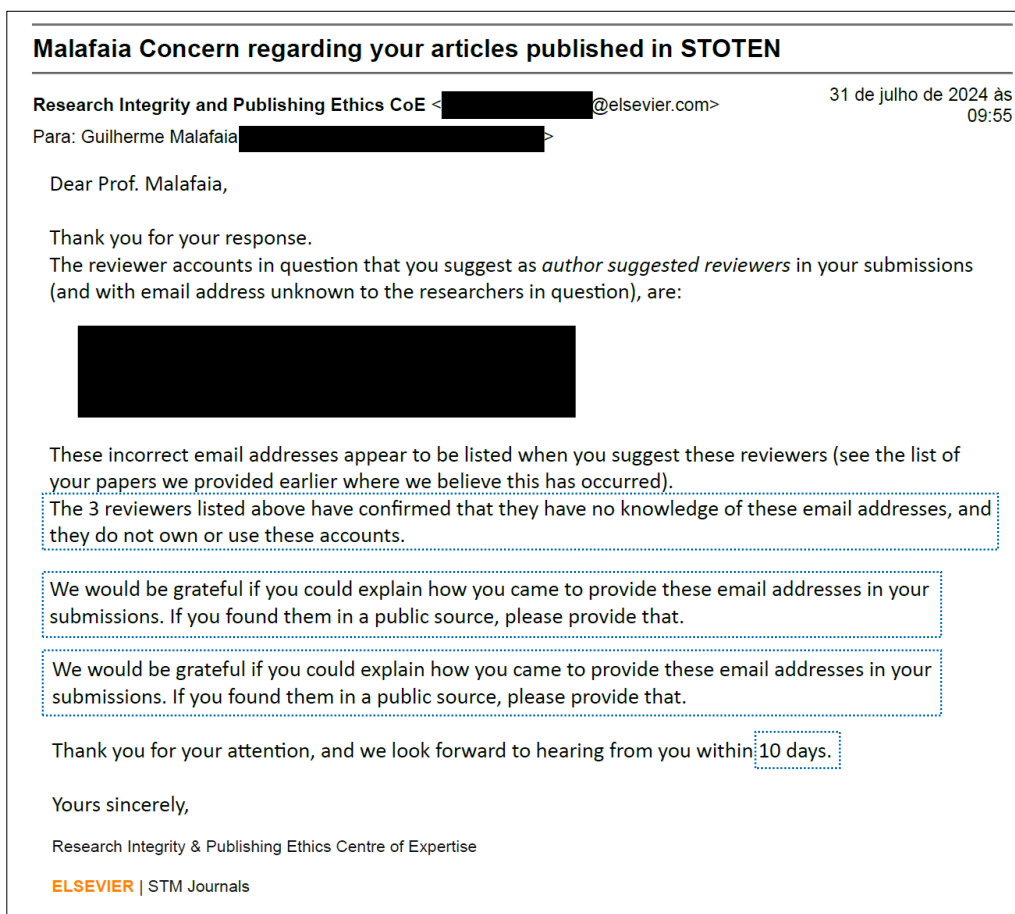
Yours sincerely,  
The Elsevier Ethics Team

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 Malafaia STOTEN 25th of July 2024.xlsx  
16K

**Note:** This print is included solely for clarification, following the principles of due process and the right to a complete defense, as the Brazilian Federal Constitution guarantees. Personal and sensitive data, such as email addresses, have been redacted in compliance with Brazil's General Data Protection Law (LGPD, Law No. 13,709/2018), as well as global standards such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European Union. This material is presented ethically and within the bounds of international legal frameworks, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which affirm the right to a fair and impartial hearing. The content is provided objectively to highlight essential elements of the case without any intent to expose or harm third parties, ensuring transparency and respect for legal and ethical boundaries.

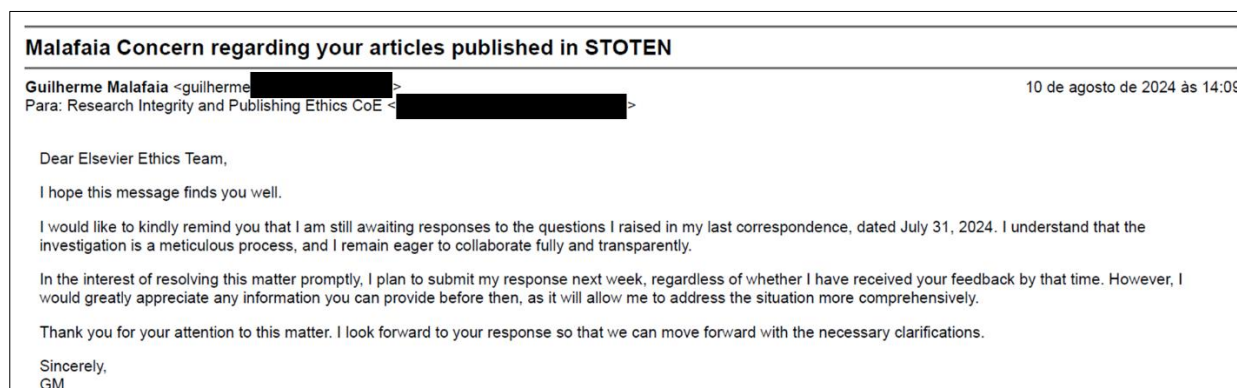
- I made several inquiries to the Elsevier Ethics Team before responding formally. Among the main points I questioned were the precise identification of the reviewers and the email addresses considered invalid, detailed information on the verification methods used to confirm the authenticity of the emails, the procedures adopted to assess the validity of the reviews, and an analysis of the criteria used to claim that the reviews were not genuine. I also questioned the lack of a clear explanation of the policies allegedly violated, why only some articles were questioned while others remained unchanged, and the exact definition of what Elsevier considered “*an adequate (...) response*”. Finally, I highlighted the lack of a specific sender in official communication, which is fundamental to ensuring transparency, traceability, and trust in the investigative process. Please see **Appendix 1** (<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1hfgu-93pfFddNiZTT99H7rjm1r7jG4b?usp=sharing>). These inquiries were necessary to ensure that my formal response could be constructed based on complete information and adequate context, ensuring that all relevant facts were considered.
- On July 31, 2024, I received another email from Elsevier's Ethics Team (see figure below), providing additional information about the reviewers mentioned in the allegations. However, the other questions I raised were not addressed.



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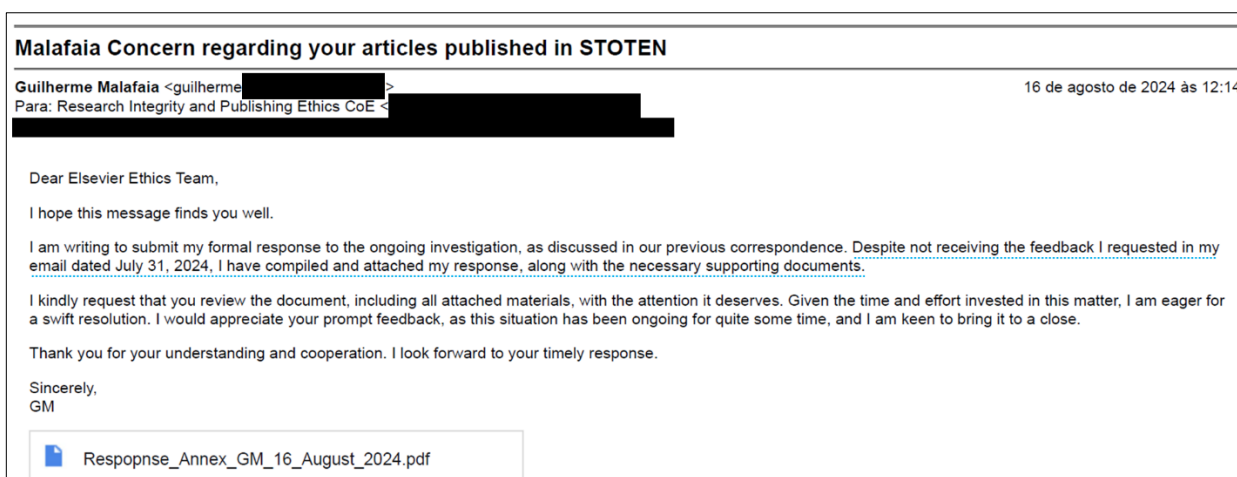
- On the same day, I again requested any additional clarifications necessary to provide a complete and substantiated response, as the initial communication needed to provide more detail on the evidence supporting the allegations. Please see **Appendix 2** (<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1hfgu-93pfFddNiZTT99H7rjm1r7jG4b?usp=sharing>).
- On August 10, 2024, I highlighted to the Elsevier Ethics Team that I was still awaiting responses to the issues raised in my previous correspondence dated July 31. I also emphasized the importance of

receiving the requested information to address the situation more comprehensively and informing them that, regardless of their response, I planned to submit my formal response the following week (see figure below).



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6. However, despite the urgency and seriousness of the issues raised, as of August 16, 2024, when I decided to submit my formal response, I had yet to receive a response from Elsevier.



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7. Even in the context of uncertainty and vulnerability generated by the lack of response, I considered it essential to present my defense proactively. The seriousness of the allegations, the potentially devastating impact on my professional reputation, and the scientific integrity of the articles I have published over several years in Stoten required a response, even though the lack of additional information compromised the possibility of a complete and transparent clarification of the facts.
8. In my response (which, for reasons of confidentiality and respect for privacy, I will not disclose in this document), I explained in detail how I obtained the names of all the reviewers suggested in my submissions and their respective e-mails. I also highlighted the technical criteria that support the reviewers' suggestions in all my submissions, always based on aspects such as expertise in the field of study, history of relevant publications, and academic recognition, in line with good editorial practices and general guidelines provided by the journals.
9. In my response, given the serious allegations and the uncertainty as to whether the reviewers I indicated actually participated in the evaluation of the articles listed by the Elsevier Ethics Team, I took the

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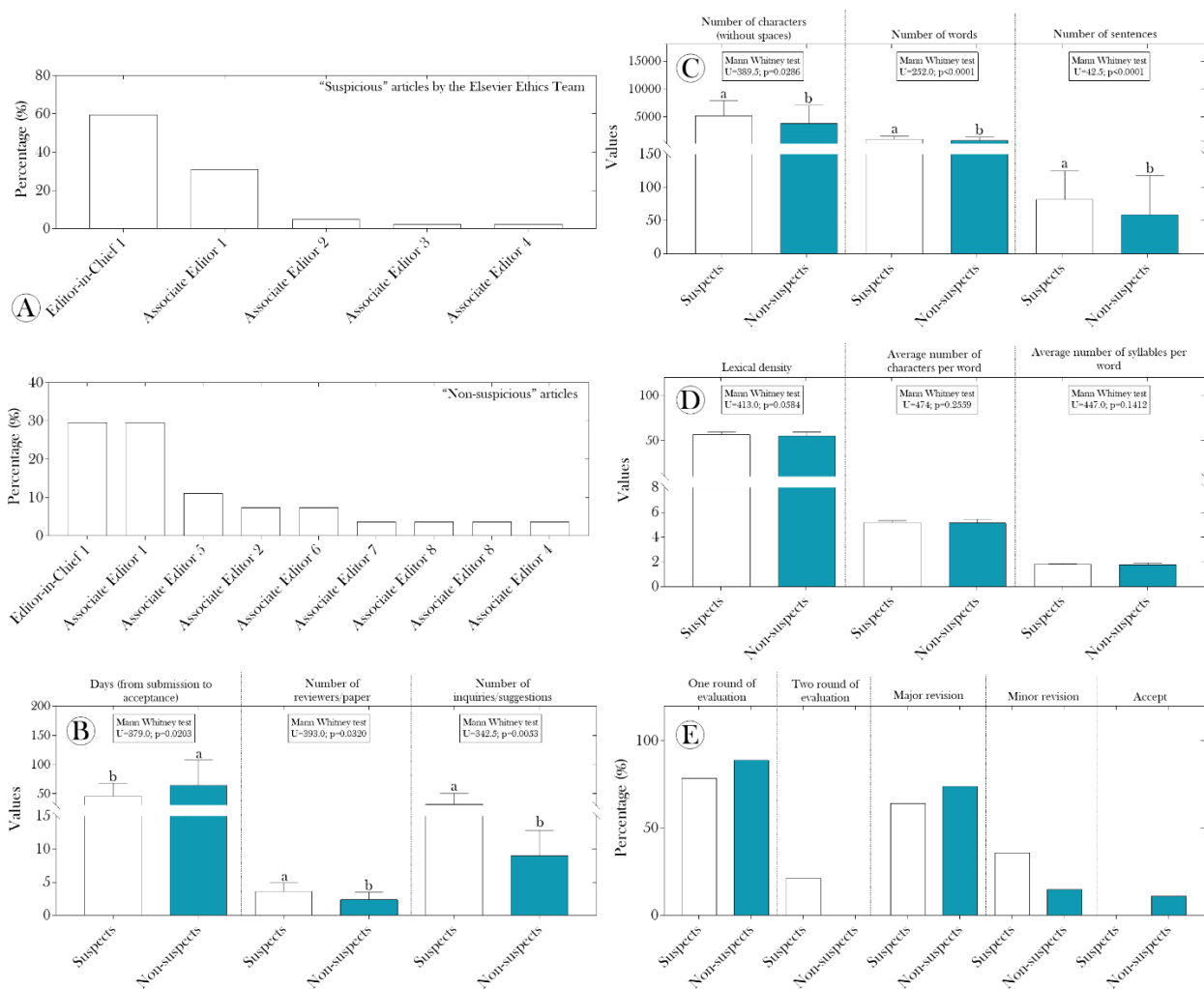
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initiative to conduct a thorough technical analysis of all the reviews I received for the articles accepted for publication in Stoten. This analysis aimed to verify whether the articles in question could have been evaluated in a biased manner, either positively or negatively, thus compromising the integrity of the peer review process. This analysis became even more essential considering that, when reporting the suspected irregularities, the Elsevier Ethics Team did not present concrete evidence to suggest any bias or prejudice in the reviews received, despite the allegations indicating the need for a more in-depth investigation into the review process.

10. Therefore, to conduct this analysis, I adopted a rigorous and meticulous approach that involved comparing the reviews received with established standards of academic review. The analysis included quantitative and qualitative criteria, such as the time (in days) between the date of submission and the communication of acceptance of the article, the number of reviewers involved in the evaluation of each article, the number of characters (without spaces) and words in the reviews, and the number of sentences present in the texts. I also considered the lexical density of the reviews, the average number of characters per word, the average number of syllables per word, and the average number of words per sentence, using widely recognized indices such as Gunning Fog, Coleman-Liau, Flesch-Kincaid, Automated Readability Index (ARI), Simple Measure of Gobbledygook (SMOG) and Flesch Reading Ease. In addition, I performed a sentiment analysis to assess the reviews' polarity, aiming to identify whether they presented a positive or negative inclination.
  11. This technical review also involved identifying the editors responsible for each article and analyzing the percentages of articles accepted and rejected, considering all my submissions to Stoten. Comparing these metrics allowed me to assess the consistency of the reviewers' comments, the depth of the analyses offered, and the coherence between the observations made and the final recommendations for acceptance or rejection. In addition, the analysis sought to identify possible signs of bias, whether through disproportionate praise or excessively harsh criticism, which could suggest the existence of partiality in the review process. In my response, I provided all the methodological details used in this evaluation, based on the relevant literature and criteria widely accepted in the scientific community, to ensure the analysis's objectivity, rigor, and reproducibility. Furthermore, I highlighted the importance of following recognized evaluation standards to provide a transparent and well-founded response, reinforcing the commitment to academic integrity and the quality of the review process.
  12. Based on basic editorial information, it is possible to observe that the editorial process for the articles deemed "suspect" by the Elsevier Ethics Team was predominantly conducted by two journal editors - one editor-in-chief and one associate editor - the same as for the articles classified as "non-suspect" (Figure 1A).
  13. As can be seen in Figure 1B, although the editorial process for the "non-suspect" articles took longer than for the "suspect" articles, the articles considered "suspect" by the Elsevier Ethics Team were evaluated by 53.7% more reviewers (3.64 versus 2.37 reviewers), who issued 255.6% more suggestions/questions (32 versus 9).
  14. To assess whether there were differences in the way the two groups of articles were treated during the review process (in terms of level of rigor and detail), different parameters that reflect the complexity of the opinions issued were analyzed, both for the articles considered "suspect" by the Elsevier Ethics Team and for the "non-suspect" ones. As shown in Figures 1C and 1D, significant differences are observed in several parameters between the opinions of the "suspect" and "non-suspect" articles. The opinions of the articles considered "suspect" by the Elsevier Ethics Team contain a greater number of characters, words, and sentences, indicating a greater level of detail. In addition, the lexical density was slightly higher in the "suspect" articles, suggesting a more technical or specific vocabulary. Regarding the average number of words per sentence, the "non-suspect" articles presented higher values, which may indicate greater complexity in the construction of the sentences. However, the assessment of readability indexes,
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such as Gunning Fog and Coleman Liau, among others (Figures 3 and 4), did not reveal significant differences between the two groups, suggesting that the difficulty of reading and understanding the reviews was similar for both. Furthermore, regarding the sentiment expressed in the reviews of the articles, we did not observe differences between the groups (“suspect”: 95.2% positive sentiment vs. “non-suspect”: 100% positive sentiment). Therefore, these results reinforce that, despite the differences in certain aspects, the level of rigor and detail of the reviews for the “suspect” articles was comparable to that of the “non-suspect” articles.

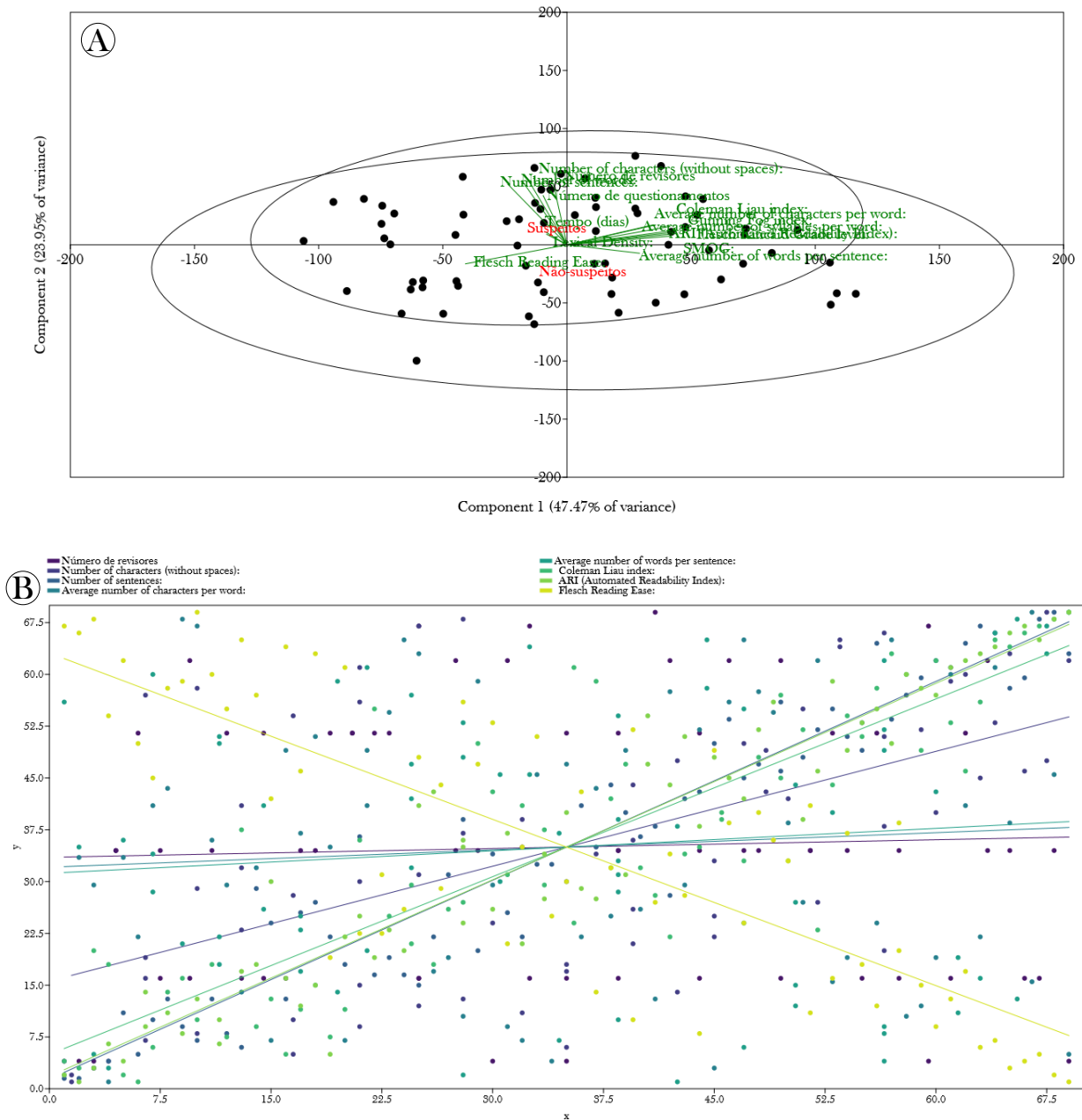
15. Figure 1E shows that 21.43% of the articles considered “suspect” by the Elsevier Ethics Team were subjected to two rounds of review. In contrast, all the “non-suspect” articles underwent only one round of review or were summarily accepted.



**Figure 1.** (A) Distribution of Editorial Responsibility for "Suspect" and "Non-suspect" Articles as Identified by the Elsevier Ethics Team. (B) Comparative analysis of time to acceptance, number of reviewers, and number of inquiries/suggestions between "suspects" and "non-suspects" articles. (C) Comparative analysis of text complexity metrics (number of characters, words, sentences, lexical density, average number of characters per word, and average number of syllables per word) between "suspects" and "non-suspects" articles. (D) Comparative analysis of readability metrics (average number of words per sentence, Gunning Fog Index, Coleman Liau Index, Flesch Kincaid Grade Level, Automated Readability Index, SMOG, and Flesch Reading Ease) between "suspects" and "non-suspects" articles. (E) Comparison of editorial decisions post-evaluation rounds for "suspects" and "non-suspects" articles, including number of rounds, type of revisions, and acceptance rates.

16. To assess the results of this analysis more robustly, allowing for the identification of complex patterns refuting or confirming the similarity between opinions and avoiding superficial conclusions, the data were subjected to advanced complementary statistical analyses, including Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and linear regression analysis.

17. These analyses revealed evidence that the reviews of the “suspect” and “non-suspect” articles are highly similar in terms of rigor and detail, suggesting that the review process was conducted consistently and fairly, regardless of the articles' classification (Figures 2A-B).



**Figure 2.** (A) Principal Component Analysis (PCA) biplot showing the distribution of “suspects” and “non-suspects” articles based on multiple editorial and review variables. This figure illustrates the PCA biplot where the first two principal components, explaining 47.47% and 23.95% of the variance, respectively, differentiate between the “suspects” and “non-suspects” articles. The overlap of the two groups suggests a lack of clear separation in the editorial and review process based on the variables analyzed, such as the number of reviewers, number of characters, and readability indices, indicating that both groups were treated similarly regarding review rigor and editorial decisions. (B) Linear regression analysis of various editorial and review variables. This figure presents a series of linear regression lines representing the relationships between different editorial and review variables, including the number of reviewers, number of characters, number of sentences, average number of characters per word, average number of words per sentence, Coleman-Liau index, Automated Readability Index (ARI), and Flesch Reading Ease. The dispersion of points and the relatively shallow slopes of the regression lines indicate a lack of strong correlation between these variables and the duration of the editorial process. This supports the notion that the review process was conducted without bias, and there was no evidence of expedited or delayed processing based on these variables, further confirming the consistency and fairness of the editorial handling of both “suspects” and “non-suspect” articles.

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18. In my response, I also presented a detailed account of my 15-year career as a researcher, highlighting my work in the editorial processes of several journals, both as an editor and as a reviewer. In addition, I attached letters from more than 20 international researchers attesting to my scientific and professional integrity, as well as formal statements provided by the rector of my institution, vice-rectors, and directors.

*Note: I have chosen not to publish these letters in this document to protect their confidentiality, protect personal information, and ensure compliance with ethics and privacy standards. However, they are available for analysis in an appropriate and secure environment, provided the senders authorize them.*

19. Also, during this period, after my access to the internet on my campus was blocked, my institution's Information Technology (IT) department informed me that my institutional credentials (login and password) had been used for over 40 different IP addresses without my knowledge. Alarmed by this discovery, I promptly initiated an institutional administrative process, requesting detailed information about unauthorized access and associated IP addresses.
20. this situation also led me to reconsider some strange emails that occasionally arrived in my inbox, which, for various reasons, I used to ignore. When reviewing my email history, I realized that, since 2018, I had received over 50 alerts from Microsoft related to requests for one-time codes, indicating attempts to access my account without authorization. After a formal inquiry with the company, I was informed that hackers were behind these attempts. However, for confidentiality reasons, they could not provide details about the origin of the attacks. Additionally, Google reported that my credentials, including emails and passwords, were found on more than 23 dark websites, reinforcing the possibility of exposure and compromise of personal and professional data over the years.
21. I have saved all related emails, including the institutional process and communication I had with Microsoft, and attached them to my formal response to demonstrate that these events compromised access to my credentials. In addition, I have included evidence of how these hacking attempts could have affected all my activities linked to these credentials, reinforcing the vulnerability of the associated information.

*Information regarding attempts to hack my institutional credentials, security notifications, and the presence of data on dark websites will not be published in this document to preserve the digital security and privacy involved. Disclosure of this information could expose existing vulnerabilities, violate personal data protection laws, such as the LGPD (Law No. 13,709/2018) and the GDPR, and compromise the confidentiality of communications with companies such as Microsoft and Google. This data was duly attached to the dossier and is available exclusively for analysis in official bodies and controlled environments, ensuring compliance with ethical and legal standards.*

22. Therefore, Elsevier's communication, together with this, drew my attention to the possible invasion of my credentials and to the urgent need to protect my academic and scientific integrity since such unauthorized access could have resulted in the improper manipulation of documents and communications associated with my work.
23. On September 23, 2024, more than a month after my formal response, I received a communication from the Elsevier Ethics Team informing me that “*The Editors-in-Chief of Science of the Total Environment have reviewed the concerns raised regarding the articles listed below, and the author response, and taken the decision to retract the articles*” (see figure below) (total of 47 articles signed by me).
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## Retraction Decision for your papers published in STOTEN

Research Integrity and Publishing Ethics CoE <[REDACTED]>  
Para: "guilhermeifgoiano@gmail.com" <guilherme[REDACTED]>

23 de setembro de 2024 às 10:18

Dear Dr Malafaia,

The Editors-in-Chief of *Science of the Total Environment* have reviewed the concerns raised regarding the articles listed below, and the author response, and taken the decision to retract the articles.

An investigation has uncovered that on each of these papers, at least one fictitious review was submitted, which the Editor took into account when making a decision on the paper. The researchers in question have confirmed that 1/ the email address supplied to the Journal on submission of the paper did not belong to them and 2/ they didn't submit the review in question despite the review(s) on the paper(s) being associated with their name. Please see here for a link to Elsevier's retraction guidelines: <https://www.elsevier.com/en-gb/about/policies-and-standards/article-withdrawal#5-article-retraction>

Please note that we will need to send a separate notice of retraction to all of the authors on each of these papers. For that reason, you will notice certain information missing in the retraction notice text below. This will be added to the individual notices, which you will also have a copy of as Corresponding Author.

You should be aware that retraction means your paper will remain online at ScienceDirect with a retraction watermark and a linked retraction notice. Please find below, for your reference, a copy of the retraction notice to be used, subject to final approval by Elsevier's retraction committee:

This article has been retracted: please see the Elsevier policy on article withdrawal (<https://www.elsevier.com/about/policies-and-standards/article-withdrawal>).

Post-publication, an investigation conducted on behalf of the journal by Elsevier's Research Integrity & Publishing Ethics team determined that <<number of reviewers>> of the reviews for this manuscript were fictitious. <<number of reviews in paper>> review(s) <<was/were>> submitted under the name of a known scientist without their knowledge. The name and contact details of the reviewer(s) <<was/were>> suggested by the author during the manuscript submission process. Although the paper was reviewed by additional reviewers chosen by the Editor, this breach compromised the editorial process. The Editors-in-Chief have lost confidence in the validity/integrity of the article and its findings and have determined that it should be retracted.

Reasonable requests for amendments to these texts may be considered but any changes will be made only with the approval of the Editor and the retraction committee.

LIST OF PAPERS:

STOTEN-D-19-04237 INGESTION OF TANNERY EFFLUENT AS A RISK FACTOR TO THE HEALTH OF BIRDS: A TOXICOLOGICAL STUDY USING Coturnix coturnix japonica AS A MODEL SYSTEM

[...]

*(List of intermediate articles omitted for conciseness. All items are properly documented and available for official review if required.)*

[...]

STOTEN-D-23-25176 USING STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODELING TO ASSESS THE GENOTOXIC AND MUTAGENIC EFFECTS OF HEAVY METAL CONTAMINATION IN THE FRESHWATER ECOSYSTEMS: A STUDY INVOLVING Oreochromis niloticus IN AN URBAN RIVER

Yours Sincerely,

The Elsevier Ethics Team

Research Integrity & Publishing Ethics Centre of Expertise  
ELSEVIER | STM Journal

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24. Convinced of my ethics and integrity, which have always guided my life, marked by the absence of any accusation of irregularity or previous unethical activity, I responded to the statement, including the Editors-in-Chief of Stoten, reiterating “ (...) that, at no time, did I engage in any misconduct or attempt to unduly influence the peer-review process.” I also highlighted that “ This decision to retract my articles, despite all the evidence and documentation I provided, will have a profoundly negative impact on my academic career and reputation. It feels unjust, given that the evidence presented clearly demonstrates my commitment to maintaining the highest ethical standards in my work.” And finally, I requested “ (...)

*an independent and more detailed review of the case, as I believe there may be information and evidence that were not adequately considered during the evaluation.”*

**Retraction Decision for your papers published in STOTEN**

Guilherme Malafaia <guilherme[REDACTED]> 23 de setembro de 2024 às 11:51  
Para: Research Integrity and Publishing Ethics CoE <[REDACTED]>

Dear Editors and Elsevier Ethics Team,

Thank you for informing me about the decision to retract my articles. However, I would like to express my deep concern and disappointment regarding this decision, especially considering the efforts I have made to present my defense and clarify all points raised during the investigation.

I would like to reiterate that, at no time, did I engage in any misconduct or attempt to unduly influence the peer-review process. Furthermore, I have made significant contributions to *Science of the Total Environment* (STOTEN) as a reviewer and editor, as well as to other Elsevier journals over the years. I have always acted with integrity, professionalism, and dedication, providing continuous service to the scientific community and to the publisher itself.

This decision to retract my articles, despite all the evidence and documentation I provided, will have a profoundly negative impact on my academic career and reputation. It feels unjust, given that the evidence presented clearly demonstrates my commitment to maintaining the highest ethical standards in my work.

In light of this, I respectfully request an independent and more detailed review of the case, as I believe there may be information and evidence that were not adequately considered during the evaluation.

I remain available to provide any additional information needed or to participate in discussions that may help clarify the facts. I also kindly request further details regarding the investigation process that led to the retraction decision, so I can fully understand the reasons and procedures involved.

I firmly believe in the integrity of my work and am committed to maintaining transparency and scientific rigor. I hope this situation can be revisited with careful consideration and impartiality, taking into account my track record, significant contributions, and the potential harm this decision poses to my career.

Thank you in advance for your attention, and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,  
GM

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25. On October 4, 2024, the Elsevier Ethics Team stated that “(...) appears clear from our investigation that there is evidence of “compromised peer-review or systematic manipulation of the editorial process.” While we understand the impact this may have on the authors, the Journal’s focus has to be on correcting the scientific record, and we therefore have no choice but to retract these papers, based on the results of this investigation, due to compromised peer-review and systematic manipulation of the editorial process.” Additionally, the Elsevier Ethics Team reported that “Our team have liaised with the Editors during the investigation of these articles and are satisfied that the Editors agree with this decision in light of their expert understanding of the field, the evidence available, and in accordance with their Editorial responsibilities.” Please see **Appendix 3** (<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1hfgu-93pfFddNiZTT99H7rjm1r7jG4b?usp=sharing>).
26. On October 6, 2024, I sent my response to the Elsevier Ethics Team, considering it important to highlight some points that, in my view, were not adequately addressed in the investigation conducted by the responsible team. I added all Stoten Editors-in-Chief in copy (cc) and presented a series of questions in a constructive, reflective, and respectful manner. I asked how it was possible that reviewers with supposedly fake emails could be registered in the system without prior verification by the editors to validate the legitimacy of these contacts. I also asked whether the lack of verification by the editors of any suggestion sent by Stoten authors was not the main factor that compromised the review process, questioning why the responsibility fell exclusively on me as the corresponding author. In addition, considering Elsevier's extensive resources, there are expected to be minimum verification mechanisms, such as email authentication, which could have prevented the situation.
27. Another point I highlighted was the need for more transparency in the investigation process, conducted by an Elsevier Ethics Team whose only contact was via generic emails, without revealing the names or positions of the people responsible for making such critical decisions. I noted that I was never presented with concrete evidence to support the allegations. I again requested that specific details be provided of the reviews considered “fictitious” and the evidence of manipulation pointed out. Finally, I emphasized that, in cases like this, the burden of proof lies with those who present the allegations, not with the authors, highlighting the need for the process to be conducted with fairness, transparency, and respect for the fundamental rights of all parties involved.

28. I also questioned the silence of the editors responsible for evaluating the articles throughout the process since they were the ones who accepted the reviews now in question. I pointed out to the Elsevier Ethics Team and the Editors that, throughout the process, there was no effort to promote an open and constructive dialogue. I stressed that a simple virtual meeting could have resolved many doubts. I asked whether the goal was really to seek a fair solution or to take the easy way out, condemning the articles to retraction without considering the negative impact that this decision would cause.

29. In my email, the entire content of **Appendix 4** (<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1hfgu-93pfFddNiZTT99H7rjm1r7jG4b?usp=sharing>), I proposed that all those involved (Elsevier Ethics Team and Stoten Editors-in-Chief) reflect on different issues. This aimed to highlight the structural and ethical flaws in the editorial process, promote transparency, shared responsibility, and scientific integrity, and stimulate a constructive dialogue to prevent similar situations from occurring again. See the transcript below.

For all these reasons, the decision to retract not only harms me, but also compromises the editorial system itself, which seems to prefer to place the blame on the authors, while ignoring the structural flaws of an editorial process that is clearly not prepared to deal with these situations in a fair and transparent manner.

Furthermore, it is worth reflecting on the text that will accompany the retraction. Phrases like:

*"There is evidence of compromised peer-review or systematic manipulation of the editorial process"* and *"The Editors-in-Chief have lost confidence in the validity/integrity of the article and its findings"* are disproportionately harsh. What is the real basis for this loss of confidence? What damage was caused when the article itself was reviewed by other independent and qualified reviewers?

With all this in mind, I would like to propose that you reflect on the following questions:

1. What really defines an author's responsibility in the review process, and where does the editor's responsibility end?
2. How can we ensure that reviewers' verification is done safely and reliably, avoiding situations like this?
3. Why did the investigation not take into account the author's presumption of innocence?
4. What could have been done to promote dialogue before such a drastic decision as retraction?
5. How can we prevent honest authors from being treated as guilty without clear evidence?
6. How can an editor trust a system that allows the inclusion of reviewers without any minimum verification?
7. If the role of the editor is to ensure transparency and ethics in the process, how can we explain that reviewers with fake emails were accepted without any questioning?
8. If the final decision is the responsibility of the editors, why was all the blame transferred to the author, who acted in good faith?
9. How can Elsevier claim to value transparency when authors are accused without access to clear and detailed evidence?
10. How can we talk about impartiality when the ethics committee did not even reveal the evidence that supported the decision?
11. What prevents other editorial failures like this from continuing to occur, since there was no self-criticism on the part of the editors and Elsevier?
12. If the intention is to ensure scientific integrity, why was there no deeper investigation into the causes of this systemic failure in the reviewer registry?
13. How can editors maintain their credibility if they themselves indirectly participated in a flawed editorial process?
14. What justification do the editors have for ignoring the fact that the article was reviewed by other independent reviewers, who were not challenged?
15. If the editorial system fails to verify reviewers, why should authors be punished for a deficiency that is beyond their control?
16. How can the ethics committee justify the decision to retract without at least offering an independent review by impartial reviewers?
17. If Elsevier is a global leader in scientific publishing, how can it accept that such operational failures compromise the peer-review process?
18. How is it possible that such a renowned company fails to use advanced technological tools to verify the authenticity of emails and identify possible fraud?
19. What prevents this same failure in the editorial process from continuing to harm other honest authors, compromising their reputation without solid justification?
20. How can we talk about trust in the scientific process when such drastic decisions are made without offering authors the opportunity for an open and constructive dialogue?
21. Do the editors really believe that retracting an article, without exploring other solutions, such as a new round of reviews, is the best way to protect scientific integrity?

I ask that this email be interpreted as an invitation to a deep and necessary reflection on how science is done, judged, and protected. I hope that we can find fairer and more transparent ways to conduct such delicate processes, so that no one else goes through what I am going through now.

Sincerely,

GM

Note: Only a portion of the email is presented in this document to ensure objectivity and conciseness. The entire content is available in Appendix 4, which is fully documented. This allows access to the complete information in a structured and contextualized manner if further detailed analysis is required.

30. The figure below shows the Elsevier Ethics Team's response to my previous email.

**Retraction Decision for your papers published in STOTEN**

Research Integrity and Publishing Ethics CoE <[REDACTED]> 8 de outubro de 2024 às 06:49  
Para: Guilherme Malafaia <guilherme.[REDACTED]>

Dear Dr Malafaia,

As we clearly explained below, our investigation concluded that there is evidence of "compromised peer-review or systematic manipulation of the editorial process" on these papers. None of the evidence you have supplied mitigates for this fact. The retraction notice is not ascribing blame to any individual(s) – it does present the facts behind the reason for retraction so that readers understand why the paper has been retracted. Namely – that fake email addresses were supplied for genuine researchers by authors at submission, and this resulted in the Editors having been influenced in their decision making by at least one fictitious review. And in many of these papers, there were multiple faked reviews. As an experienced peer reviewer, researcher, and editor of scientific Journals you will undoubtedly recognise the importance of independent peer review as a means to assisting editors in making editorial decisions, and as a crucial component of formal scholarly communication at the heart of the scientific method.

Although Publishers and Editors attempt to capture breaches in the journals' policies in real time, this is not always possible, and appropriate corrective actions can be applied retroactively.

Please know that every retraction decision on a paper at Elsevier is additionally subject to approval by our internal Retraction Panel: they will review the details of the case and make a determination as to whether the decision was made on sufficiently appropriate grounds.

Sincerely,

The Elsevier Ethics Team  
Research Integrity & Publishing Ethics Centre of Expertise  
ELSEVIER | STM Journals

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31. I immediately responded to the Elsevier Ethics Team, the content of which is transcribed in full in the figure below. I highlighted that some issues previously raised were being revisited despite the Elsevier Ethics Team considering them not directly related to the central point of the case under analysis.

## Retraction Decision for your papers published in STOTEN

Guilherme Malafaia <guilherme[REDACTED]>  
Para: Research Integrity and Publishing Ethics CoE <[REDACTED]>

8 de outubro de 2024 às 08:00

Dear Elsevier Ethics Committee and Editors,

Thank you once again for your response. While I understand and deeply respect the importance of an independent peer review process, I regret that some crucial points I raised have not been fully acknowledged. It is equally important to recognize that there were failures in Elsevier's editorial system that should have been addressed throughout this investigation.

As previously mentioned, the responsibility for verifying reviewers' credentials falls not only on authors but also on the editors and the submission system itself. The fact that reviewers with invalid emails were accepted without any prior verification indicates a clear flaw in the editorial process, a responsibility that must be shared by the editors involved. Had even a basic check of the email authenticity been carried out, this issue could have been prevented, and I would have been alerted to the hacking attempts on my accounts—of which I have provided evidence—compromising the integrity of the review process. It is concerning that this verification issue has not yet been adequately addressed.

Moreover, the assertion that "none of the evidence you have provided mitigates this fact" overlooks the significance of the proof I have submitted. This includes legitimate sources for the emails, as well as my established track record of ethical conduct as an author, reviewer, and editor for numerous reputable publications, including Elsevier. Dismissing this evidence without deeper analysis seems to disregard key information needed for a fair assessment.

Furthermore, no evidence has been presented to date that unequivocally proves I manipulated the review process or submitted false reviews. The absence of concrete proof weakens the case against me, particularly in a legal context where the presumption of innocence requires the accusation to be supported by clear and irrefutable evidence—something which has not been provided.

While publishers and editors strive to capture policy violations in real time, this is not always possible, and breaches of my credentials (for which legal measures are being taken in Brazil) are beyond my control. It is devastating to see my career, built over years of dedication, being tarnished by an issue for which I bear no responsibility.

I have reflected deeply and asked myself repeatedly: why would I engage in such actions? What reason would I have to risk my reputation and career, which I have worked so hard to build? More importantly, why would someone create these emails and issue reviews on my articles? I have considered many possibilities, and these questions haunt me: Could someone be deliberately attempting to harm my reputation and sabotage my scientific career? Could this be an attempt to destabilize the editorial system itself by exploiting weaknesses to undermine the peer review process? Are there hidden interests aiming to compromise my name and the research I have contributed to? Could the hacking of my accounts have allowed someone external to manipulate this process without my knowledge? Could there be malicious exploitation of Elsevier's verification failures to create confusion and shift the blame onto me? Who stands to benefit from this situation, whether by undermining my integrity or advancing other authors' interests?

These questions are troubling, and I cannot find clear answers. However, what I do know is that these breaches and manipulations were beyond my control. I am fully committed to cooperating with any investigation that seeks to clarify these facts. I respectfully ask the Ethics Committee and Elsevier to reflect on these issues and consider the possibility that I, as the author, am a victim of an unknown scheme rather than its perpetrator.

It is well understood that peer reviews serve only as support for the final editorial decision, which lies solely with the editors. According to Elsevier's editorial policies and those of STOTEN (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/science-of-the-total-environment/publish/guide-for-authors>), the editors, particularly the Editor-in-Chief, are responsible for making the final determination on the acceptance or rejection of a manuscript. While reviews provide valuable insights, it is the editor's role to assess the scientific merit of the article and make the final decision based on both the reviews and their own observations.

Furthermore, as outlined in my analysis, the articles in question were also evaluated by other researchers, whose opinions seem to have been disregarded along with those of the editors. It is inconceivable that experienced editors, such as [REDACTED] who oversaw most of the articles in question, would lack the capacity to assess the scientific validity of these papers. I have never received any criticism regarding the validity of the published data, and the fact that these articles have been widely cited in reputable journals only reinforces their acceptance and relevance within the scientific community. In light of this, a fair and reasonable solution would be to conduct a new round of independent reviews.

I humbly ask the committee to consider the importance of evaluating the technical and scientific merits of this issue. It would be unethical to overlook the scientific value of these articles, especially when none of the reviewers or the scientific community has ever questioned the integrity of the data. As an author with a proven track record of ethical contributions to the field, I ask that you reflect on the devastating impact that a harsh and inaccurate retraction notice could have. A more balanced statement, one that acknowledges potential editorial and verification failures, while still recognizing the scientific worth of these studies, would be just and ethical. This would not only safeguard the integrity of the process but also ensure that the reputation of authors who have upheld scientific and ethical standards is not unjustly damaged.

Finally, I suggest a practical and collaborative approach to clarifying the facts in a fair and transparent manner. A new round of review by an independent and impartial panel would be a suitable course of action to ensure the scientific merit of the articles is judged equitably, without the influence of the issues raised. Additionally, to ensure full transparency, judicial unsealing of the emails used in the process could be requested to track the origin of the communications and verify who actually issued the reviews. I believe these steps, both technical review and investigation, would restore trust in the process and resolve any misunderstandings, allowing for a fair and fact-based conclusion. I am entirely willing to collaborate with any measure that may contribute to resolving this matter.

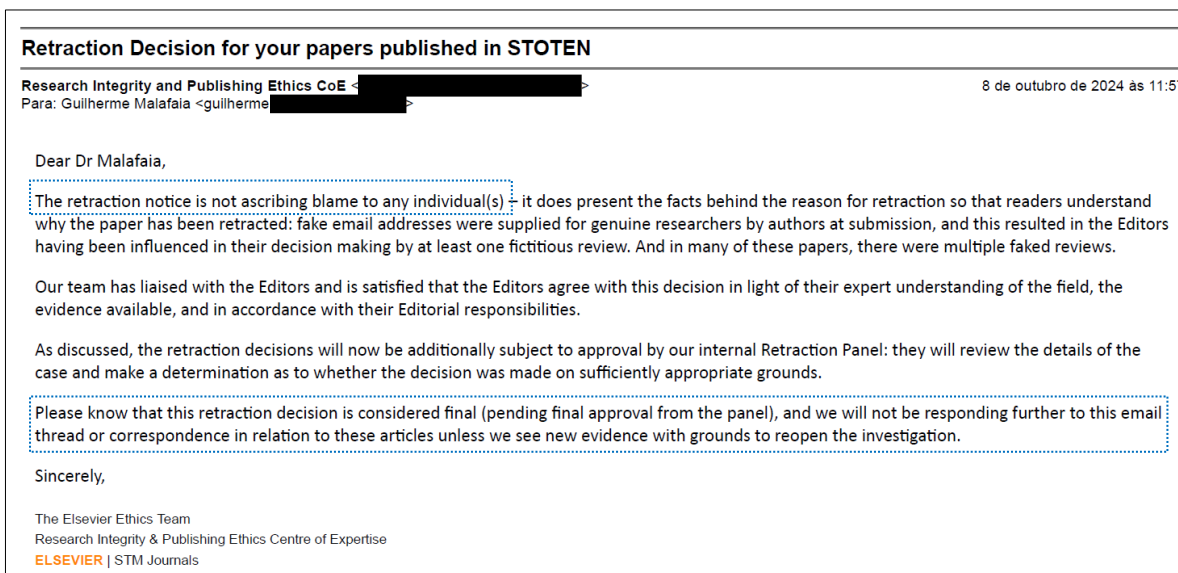
I remain available to cooperate in a constructive manner, seeking not only to preserve scientific integrity but also to improve the editorial process so that situations like this do not recur.

Sincerely,

GM

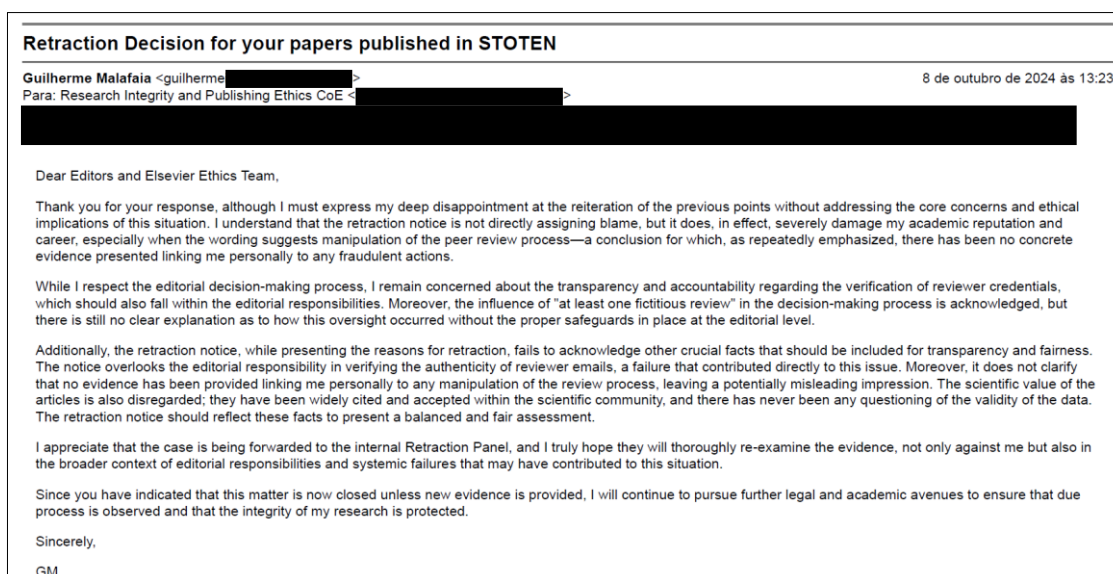
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32. On the same day, the Elsevier Ethics Team responded to my email, highlighting, among other aspects presented in full in the figure below, that “*The retraction notice is not ascribing blame to any individual(s)*” and that “*Our team has liaised with the Editors and is satisfied that the Editors agree with this decision in light of their expert understanding of the field, the evidence available, and in accordance with their Editorial responsibilities.*” At the end of the email, the Elsevier Ethics Team informed that “*(...) this retraction decision is considered final (pending final approval from the panel), and we will not be responding further to this email thread or correspondence in relation to these articles unless we see new evidence with grounds to reopen the investigation.*”, formally ending the communication without directly addressing the requests and questions previously presented.



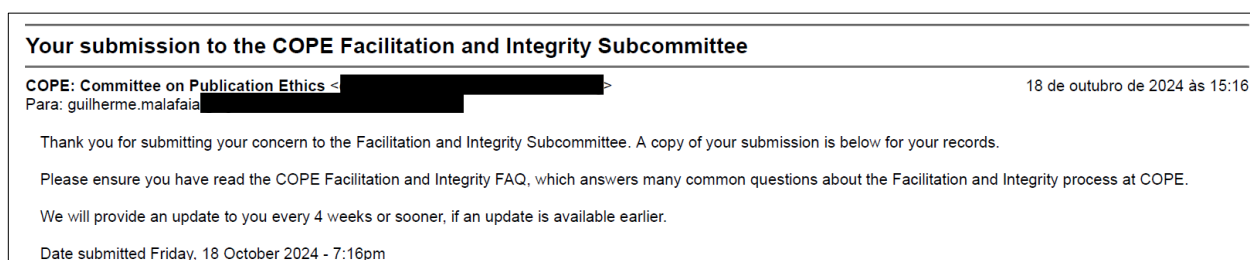
**Note:** This print is included solely for clarification, following the principles of due process and the right to a complete defense, as the Brazilian Federal Constitution guarantees. Personal and sensitive data, such as email addresses, have been redacted in compliance with Brazil's General Data Protection Law (LGPD, Law No. 13.709/2018), as well as global standards such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European Union. This material is presented ethically and within the bounds of international legal frameworks, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which affirm the right to a fair and impartial hearing. The content is provided objectively to highlight essential elements of the case without any intent to expose or harm third parties, ensuring transparency and respect for legal and ethical boundaries.

33. In response, I again stressed the importance of properly considering the abovementioned issues and emphasized my expectation that the case would be referred to the internal Retraction Panel. I also expressed my hope that the panel would carefully re-examine the evidence, not only about me but also in the broader context of editorial responsibilities and possible systemic failures that may have contributed to this situation (see transcript below).



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34. I received no further response from the Elsevier Ethics Team after that.
35. Given this context, I felt compelled to contact the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) (see figure below), an international organization of which Elsevier is a member, to which I reported all the procedural flaws identified during the investigation conducted by the publisher. In the process, I highlighted the need for more transparency, the absence of concrete evidence to support the allegations, the limited communication with the authors, and the need for a constructive dialogue to clarify the facts. I also questioned the shared responsibility between authors and editors in the peer review process, pointing out inconsistencies in editorial oversight and requesting that COPE assess whether the principles of transparency, fairness, and due process, as defined in its guidelines, were duly respected. I also asked that COPE recommend that Elsevier reconsider the retraction decision or, at least, an impartial reassessment of the articles involved.



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36. In parallel, by following discussions on social media and platforms such as PubPeer, I became aware of publications that mentioned editorial practices of several Elsevier journals, including references to editors involved in editing my articles. A search for the names of Stoten Editors in public sources and academic platforms can help assess how issues related to editorial oversight, potential conflicts of interest, and the frequency of co-authorship between editors and authors are being discussed about these editors.
37. Another relevant aspect that should be mentioned impartially is the emergence of information related to published articles in which Stoten editors acted simultaneously as editors and authors. This practice raised potential questions about conflicts of interest and was widely discussed on social media and platforms such as PubPeer.
38. Additionally, there are records of the publication of errata in these articles that, instead of clarifying or justifying the editorial process, indicated that the editing was conducted by co-authors or frequent collaborators of the editors themselves. Such situations raise debates about transparency and editorial ethics, especially considering the collaborative nature and potential challenges to impartiality in such cases.
39. Furthermore, Stoten's current status as "on hold" in the Web of Science database (maintained by Clarivate) due to concerns about the quality of its content highlights the need for comprehensive reviews of its compliance with criteria related to editorial quality, scientific integrity, and publishing practices. This status underscores the critical importance of evaluating and addressing editorial practices that may compromise the journal's reputation and the trust placed in it by authors and readers.
40. Given this scenario, widely discussed on websites, social networks, and academic platforms, it is inevitable, as a human being, not to ask: how can we ensure that recent retractions are not isolated responses to more significant and more systemic problems in the editorial process of renowned journals such as Stoten? Furthermore, what does Stoten's "on hold" status in the Web of Science database reveal about possible weaknesses in the editorial governance of high-impact scientific journals? Could these individual retractions reflect a broader failure in editorial management, potentially undermining trust in the integrity of the scientific publishing process?

41. Based on this information, I wrote again to the Elsevier Ethics Team (on October 25, 2024), presenting these elements as critical factors that warranted a reassessment of the process. The following transcript highlights some aspects that I consider relevant.

**New evidence for reopening the investigation retraction**

Guilherme Malafaia <guilherme...> 25 de outubro de 2024 às 09:42  
Para: Research Integrity and Publishing Ethics CoE <...>

Dear members of the Elsevier Ethics Committee,

I would like to thank you for the dedication with which you have handled the case related to the articles suspected of manipulating the review process and the target of imminent retractions. I sincerely recognize and respect your role in maintaining scientific integrity and trust in academic publishing.

I am sending this message to bring to light new points that I consider important to ensure the impartiality of the editorial process. Therefore, I would like to respectfully raise the following aspects for the Committee's consideration since I consider them essential and strong enough to reassess the situation in which I find myself, together with hundreds of authors linked to the papers.

[...]  
*(Portions of the email have been omitted for ethical and confidentiality reasons and to protect personal and sensitive information. This ensures compliance with privacy standards and maintains the integrity of the documentation while focusing on the relevant aspects of this context. All items are properly documented and available for official review if required.)*  
[...]

Again, I ask that the Committee provide concrete evidence (proof) that these editors were duly investigated and any evidence that directly and unquestionably links this situation to me. The burden of proof lies with the accuser, and no irrefutable evidence has been presented that the process was conducted in accordance with the principles of objectivity and transparency defended by Elsevier and COPE.

Given this, how can Elsevier justify the statement in the retraction text: "The investigation was carried out in accordance with Elsevier's policies and those of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). Elsevier takes its obligations to uphold research integrity and publishing ethics with the utmost seriousness and objectivity and corrects the scientific record when breaches of Elsevier's (and COPE's) publishing ethics policies - such as those found in this investigation - become apparent."? If integrity and seriousness really were essential principles here, how does the Committee explain the lack of evidence of an adequate audit of the conduct of the editors who, at the very least, demonstrated negligence in not verifying the authenticity of the contacts? Furthermore, what evidence does Elsevier have to claim that there was a "compromise of the editorial process" caused by me without first ensuring that the editors themselves, by accepting the reviewers without any verification, were not the true ones responsible for such compromise? Given the substantial evidence I presented in my response, it is clear that, in this case, the authors—not the editors—do not trust the integrity of the editorial process conducted by STOTEN. The credibility of articles edited by these editors is deeply compromised when editorial practices involve blatant conflicts of interest, cross-reviews, and constant co-authorship among the editors themselves, which demonstrate a worrying lack of transparency and ethics. How can we, as authors, trust that our articles have been judged with impartiality and scientific rigor when those responsible for conducting the editorial process have failed to take basic verification measures, such as authenticating reviewers' emails?

[...]  
*(Portions of the email have been omitted for ethical and confidentiality reasons and to protect personal and sensitive information.)*  
[...]

I want to emphasize that, throughout the entire process, the Committee challenged none of the arguments and clarifications I presented. Instead of a detailed and reasoned response to my questions, I received only a summary decision to retract without concrete evidence. Even more severe is the fact that all authors were notified of the ongoing retractions without a clear or reasoned explanation to support such a decision. This approach places the authors in a position of extreme vulnerability and disrespect, especially considering that the presence of fictitious emails between reviewers raises serious questions about the verification and validation process carried out by the editorial team but does not constitute evidence of misconduct or manipulation on my part or the part of my co-authors.

[...]  
*(Portions of the email have been omitted for ethical and confidentiality reasons and to protect personal and sensitive information.)*  
[...]

Given the seriousness of the points raised, I respectfully request that the Committee temporarily suspend the articles' retractions until a new investigation is conducted by an independent team with no direct ties to the editors of STOTEN. Only an impartial analysis can adequately clarify the role of the editors involved and ensure that Elsevier and COPE's ethical standards were followed.

The decision to retract articles overseen by editors with questionable editorial practices sets a worrying precedent for the scientific integrity of all authors who conducted their research in good faith. This stance negatively impacts trust in the editorial process and calls into question the decisions' impartiality.

[...]  
*(Portions of the email have been omitted for ethical and confidentiality reasons and to protect personal and sensitive information.)*  
[...]

Sincerely,  
Guilherme Malafaia

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42. In parallel, I forwarded this information and a copy of my email to COPE, which incorporated these elements into the analysis by a subcommittee designated to analyze the case.

43. On October 31, 2024, COPE formally contacted Elsevier, the transcript of which is presented below.

## Concerns raised to COPE about notification of retraction for publications in the journal *Science of the Total Environment*

Para: [REDACTED]@publicationethics.org> 31 de outubro de 2024 às 04:06  
Publishing Ethics <[REDACTED]> "Ethics Expert (ELS)" <[REDACTED]>, Elsevier  
Cc: Guilherme Malafaia <[REDACTED]>

Dear Dr [REDACTED], Dr [REDACTED], Dr [REDACTED] and Dr [REDACTED],

I am writing to you as Guilherme Malafaia – cc-d in this email - has contacted the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) to raise concerns in relation to the notification of retraction he received for a set of publications in the journal *Science of the Total Environment*.

COPE's role is primarily to provide advice for member editors and journals and to promote a better understanding of publication ethics. If concerns are raised to COPE's attention, we aim to provide guidance on whether there are any actions that are not aligned with the COPE Core Practices or COPE guidelines. We do not interfere with specific editorial decisions.

With this in mind, we are writing to you in the hope that we can facilitate a dialogue in relation to Dr Malafaia's concerns. In order to make the process as transparent and constructive as possible, we have copied Dr Malafaia into this email and request that you do the same in your reply.

Dr Malafaia has noted concerns about the journal's intention to retract the articles. He indicates that the journal contacted him last July indicating concerns about the reviews submitted for the articles, the journal stated that the individuals listed as reviewers were not associated with the reviews and thus the reviews submitted were allegedly not genuine. The journal noted concerns that the peer-review process had been compromised. Dr Malafaia provided a response to the journal with clarifications on the reviewers suggested and requesting additional clarification on the concerns. He indicates that the journal did not provide the requested clarification and instead notified him of the retraction of the articles. Dr Malafaia feels that the decision for retraction is not justified as there is no evidence that the authors were involved in manipulation of the review process, and no questions have been raised about the integrity of the article content. Dr Malafaia has also raised concerns about the editorial practices in the journal as a number of comments on the Pubpeer platform suggest that members of the editorial board handled manuscripts on which they were authors, or authored by their collaborators, undermining the credibility of these editors and the journal in making decisions regarding manipulation of the peer review on their own articles. We include below a summary of Dr Malafaia's concerns.

We would very much appreciate hearing your comments in relation to these concerns. Could you please provide a response to the following items:

- Please provide a summary of the process followed to evaluate the concerns about Dr Malafaia's articles, including how the concerns were raised to the journal's attention, how the post-publication review of the articles was completed, who was involved in this evaluation, and the specific concerns that constitute the grounds for the retractions.
- Please clarify whether for each of Dr Malafaia's publications for which the journal issued a notification for retraction, the journal has confirmed that a fake reviewer account was used, i.e. that this has been confirmed through contacts with the researchers whose names were used.
- Please indicate whether the journal considered other options to address the concerns about the articles (e.g. a Correction or an Expression of Concern). If other options to correct the record were considered, please comment on the circumstances that informed the decision to retract.
- Dr Malafaia has noted concerns raised in a public forum about the fact that a number of publications in *Science of the Total Environment* have been handled in ways that deviate from the expectations in COPE guidelines regarding editorial competing interests - for example, there are several articles where the listed handled editor is one of the authors of the article. Can you please comment on this and on the steps that the journal is taking to address this concern, and the assignment of editorial board members to manuscripts more broadly so that competing interests are prevented.

Many thanks for helping us address Dr Malafaia's concerns. We look forward to hearing from you.

With best wishes,

[REDACTED]  
Facilitation and Integrity Officer  
Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)  
[www.publicationethics.org](http://www.publicationethics.org)

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44. On November 8, 2024, Elsevier responded to COPE's questions, as seen in **Appendix 5** (<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1hfgu-93pfFddNiZTT99H7rjm1r7jG4b?usp=sharing>).

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45. I must emphasize that my intention has never been to harm or unduly accuse any person or institution. However, given the response to COPE, I am obliged, as a citizen with rights, an honest person, and committed to ethics and justice, to highlight some points that I consider critical.
46. The initial motivation for the investigation (see transcript below) was provided by Elsevier only 107 days after the first communication (July 25, 2024), although I had repeatedly asked about it. Such motivation, based mainly on a single author's high number of publications, raises questions about the clarity and transparency of the criteria used to raise suspicions. Could starting an investigation without a more detailed and specific basis be interpreted as a procedure that lacks depth and possibly does not fully consider the scientific quality of the articles involved and the authors' history of suitability? Furthermore, how can we interpret a justification that focuses on the number of articles published without considering fundamental aspects, such as their academic contribution and scientific relevance? Another point that deserves reflection is the absence of the name of the editor responsible for initiating the investigative process. Transparency regarding this information is essential, not only to ensure clarity in the procedure but also to ensure no conflict of interest. The lack of this guarantee can raise legitimate doubts about the impartiality of the process and weaken confidence in the ethical and technical evaluation of the investigations. These questions seek to foster a broader discussion about the importance of transparency, fairness, and integrity in processes of this nature, constantly to strengthen trust in the academic and editorial community.

An editor at the journal noticed a high number of papers were being published by this author and flagged to the Journal's Publisher for investigation.

47. The use of the terms "*c.45 submissions*" and "*45 papers*" (see transcript below) reflects a lack of precision that is not expected in a context as severe as the retraction of scientific articles. In situations like this, clarity in numbers is essential to demonstrate rigor and transparency in the investigative process. Furthermore, this reference contradicts previous communications, which indicated different numbers of articles under investigation (42, 47 and, now, "c.45" and "45"). These inconsistencies generate confusion and raise doubts about the methodology adopted and the conclusions' reliability, especially in cases requiring the utmost attention to detail and impartiality to preserve confidence in scientific integrity.

1/ In *c.45 of the author's submissions* (where he acted as Corresponding Author) fictitious email addresses for certain author-suggested reviewers were provided by the Corresponding Author at submission.

2/ In these *c.45 submissions*, at least 1 (and in many cases, multiple) fictitious reviews were conducted based on Editor (via automated Editorial Manager) invitations to these fictitious email addresses. The researchers in question confirm that in addition to never having used these email addresses, they did not conduct the reviews for these papers.

Before taking a decision to retract the 45 papers we of course checked with the 'real researchers' via their Institutional email addresses to confirm:

48. Elsevier claims that the "fictitious email addresses" were provided by the corresponding author but provides no tangible evidence to support this claim. There are no details on how the email addresses were identified as fictitious, and more information needs to be provided on the methods used to confirm that the reviewers did not use such addresses. Without such evidence, the claims could be interpreted as unfounded assumptions, violating the principle of the presumption of innocence.
49. Elsevier claims that the fictitious reviews were conducted based on editor invitations through the Editorial Manager. This implies that the editors did not perform any verification of the authenticity of the emails. This editorial failure is ignored in the statement, transferring all responsibility to the corresponding author. If the automated system that Elsevier uses does not verify and validate reviewers' information, it
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also becomes a point of failure. The lack of adequate control is a systemic problem that cannot be attributed exclusively to the corresponding author.

50. Elsevier mentions that "at least 1 (and in many cases, multiple) fictitious reviews were conducted," but does not clarify which reviews were considered fictitious, what criteria were used to determine that these reviews were not legitimate, and how the link between the corresponding author and these reviews was established. Without clarifying these points, the statement lacks transparency and can be interpreted as generic and accusatory, without any concrete basis.
51. Elsevier's statement that the "researchers in question confirm that in addition to never having used these email addresses, they did not conduct the reviews for these papers." leaves some critical questions unanswered. It is unclear how the researchers were contacted, what methods were used to verify this information, or whether evidence was presented to support these confirmations. Furthermore, it did not consider the possibility that third parties could have used these emails without the researchers' knowledge, which is unfortunately not uncommon in digital vulnerabilities. Another point that deserves attention is the need for more explanations about the editorial system's responsibility to ensure that review invitations are sent to legitimate reviewers. The question remains: how did the system allow these emails without minimum authentication mechanisms? These questions are not raised to disqualify but to highlight the importance of a more in-depth and transparent investigative process that ensures the trust of all involved and promotes a constructive and fair dialogue.
52. Elsevier's repeated use of the term "fictitious" to describe emails, reviews, and news reports of retractions (see example below) raises important questions that deserve reflection. If, as Elsevier indicates, the editors received and considered the reviews in the editorial decision-making process, how can these reviews be classified as "fictitious"? After all, were there reviews or not? If there were, how can they be considered "not genuine"? The choice of this term, without any context or concrete evidence being presented, suggests an interpretation of fraudulent intent that has not been proven. In addition to being ambiguous, this language can lead to erroneous judgments, unfairly damaging the author's reputation. Adopting such definitive terms as "fictitious" in a case that lacks clarification and detailed evidence can be seen as an act compromising the process's impartiality. More than that, it creates an accusatory narrative that, without clear foundations, puts the credibility of the investigative process at risk. The issue here is not only legal but also ethical. Is it legitimate to classify as "fictitious" something that was received and evaluated by the editors themselves? Is it fair to attribute such serious responsibility without considering other possibilities, such as flaws in the editorial system or the digital vulnerability that may have allowed the misuse of emails? I reiterate that these questions are not asked to disqualify the process but to seek a more profound and fairer analysis, which considers the author's position and the complexity of the entire system involved.

This article has been retracted: please see Elsevier Policy on Article Withdrawal (<https://www.elsevier.com/locate/withdrawalpolicy> ↗).

This article has been retracted at the request of the Editor-in-Chief.

Post-publication, an investigation conducted on behalf of the journal by Elsevier's Research Integrity & Publishing Ethics team determined that 1 of the reviews for this manuscript was fictitious. 1 review was submitted under the name of a known scientist without their knowledge. The name and fictitious contact details of the reviewer were submitted by the Corresponding Author Guilherme Malafaia during the manuscript submission process. Although the paper was reviewed by additional reviewers chosen by the Editor, this breach compromised the editorial process. The Editors-in-Chief have lost confidence in the validity/integrity of the article and its findings and have determined that it should be retracted.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969723041529>

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53. Elsevier cites COPE guidelines to support its conclusions, using terms such as “fabricated” to describe emails related to peer review (see the transcript below). However, this approach raises important questions that warrant clarification. Fortunately, Elsevier has provided no evidence, nor is there any probative element that unequivocally establishes a connection between myself and the creation or deliberate use of such addresses. Without a clear explanation, this claim appears to be based more on assumptions than verifiable facts. Moreover, the term “*high confidence level*,” used to justify the conclusion of “*systematic misconduct*,” raises questions. Who exactly holds this “*high confidence level*”? Is it the Elsevier Ethics Team? If so, who comprises this team? Or are they the editors-in-chief? If so, which editors? Are these the same editors with multiple entries on PubPeer raising concerns about their reliability and editorial practices? In a case of such gravity, terms like “high confidence level” should be accompanied by a detailed and transparent explanation regarding the origin of this judgment and the concrete evidence supporting such a claim.

COPE's own guidelines related to “systematic manipulation of the peer review process” indicate that:

“Clear evidence of peer review manipulation (eg... fabricated emails used for author suggested reviewers (eg, fabricated emails using the names of real experts in the field)” - provides a “**high confidence level**” that systematic misconduct has taken place.

54. The COPE Retraction Guidelines advise that editors consider retracting a publication if it is implicated in at least one of the following aspects.

## RETRACTION GUIDELINES

**COPE Retraction Guidelines** are formal **COPE** policy and are intended to advise editors and publishers on expected practices when considering whether a retraction is appropriate, and how to issue a retraction.

### Summary

**Editors should consider retracting a publication<sup>1</sup> if:**

- They have clear evidence that the findings are unreliable, either as a result of major error (eg, miscalculation or experimental error), or as a result of fabrication (eg, of data) or falsification (eg, image manipulation)
- It constitutes plagiarism
- The findings have previously been published elsewhere without proper attribution to previous sources or disclosure to the editor, permission to republish, or justification (ie, cases of redundant publication)
- It contains material or data without authorisation for use
- Copyright has been infringed or there is some other serious legal issue (eg, libel, privacy)
- It reports unethical research
- It has been published solely on the basis of a compromised or manipulated peer review process
- The author(s) failed to disclose a major competing interest (aka, conflict of interest) that, in the view of the editor, would have unduly affected interpretations of the work or recommendations by editors and peer reviewers.

<https://publicationethics.org/sites/default/files/retraction-guidelines-cope.pdf>

55. Conversely, COPE advises that in some cases, retractions are not usually appropriate (see transcript below). How can we trust conclusive evidence where Elsevier's communication does not provide detailed or shared evidence? In any scientific or ethical area, “evidence” implies verifiable, concrete, and robust elements that can be analyzed and validated objectively and transparently. However, the lack of clarity about the nature of the evidence and the lack of access to it raises legitimate doubts about the soundness of the retraction decision. Why did Elsevier choose this path if COPE's guidelines establish that publishers should only proceed with retractions in the face of inconclusive evidence or with additional reliable information?

**Retractions are not usually appropriate if:**

- The authorship is disputed but there is no reason to doubt the validity of the findings
- The main findings of the work are still reliable and correction could sufficiently address errors or concerns
- An editor has inconclusive evidence to support retraction, or is awaiting additional information such as from an institutional investigation (for information about expressions of concern see (<https://COPE.onl/forum-concern>))
- Author conflicts of interest have been reported to the journal after publication, but in the editor's view these are not likely to have influenced interpretations or recommendations, or the conclusions of the article.

<https://publicationethics.org/sites/default/files/retraction-guidelines-cope.pdf>

56. Although Elsevier claims to have followed the COPE process and responded to my communications (see transcript below), the email exchanges presented in this document indicate a different reality. Several of my questions submitted throughout the process were not adequately addressed, many remaining without clear or conclusive answers.

We have followed the COPE process in conducting this investigation, in terms of process as well as communication with the Corresponding (and other) authors. While the Corresponding Author has sent us a number of communications which we have assessed (and responded to), it is clear from our investigation that regardless of who is ultimately responsible, there is clear evidence of “compromised peer-review or systematic manipulation of the editorial process”. As such, the final decision is to retract the papers.

57. Furthermore, the statement mentioning “*compromised peer-review or systematic manipulation of the editorial process*” lacks precision and creates ambiguity. After all, which of the two situations was identified? If the acknowledgment is that there was a “*compromised peer review*,” this could be explained by the explicit non-compliance with editorial policies by the Editors, who have the responsibility to verify the reviewers’ information and ensure the integrity of the process. This editorial responsibility seems to have been neglected, contributing to the situation described. On the other hand, if there was a “systematic manipulation of the editorial process,” this should have been duly proven; after all, any serious investigation must always be based on concrete, transparent, and verifiable evidence.
58. Elsevier’s statement that “*The Editors of the Journal were involved in the investigation and have endorsed the final retraction decisions*” raises important questions about the transparency and consistency of the process. Now, suppose the editors were indeed involved in the investigation. Why does the retraction notice specifically mention that it was made “*at the request of the Editor-in-Chief*” in the singular? This suggests that the final decision may not have resulted from a broad consensus among the editors but rather an individual decision, contrasting with the idea of a collegial and in-depth analysis. Furthermore, the mention that “*an editor at the journal noticed a high number of papers were being published by this author and flagged to the Journal’s Publisher for investigation*” raises the question of which editor was responsible for initiating the process and what objective criteria were used to justify this action. It is unclear whether other editors corroborated this initial observation or whether it was enough to trigger a large-scale investigation with a significant impact on the author's reputation and the credibility of the retracted articles.

Our team has liaised with the Editors and is satisfied that the Editors agree with this decision in light of their expert understanding of the field, the evidence available, and in accordance with their Editorial responsibilities.

The Editors-in-Chief of *Science of the Total Environment* have reviewed the concerns raised regarding the articles listed below, and the author response, and taken the decision to retract the articles.

An editor at the journal noticed a high number of papers were being published by this author and flagged to the Journal's Publisher for investigation.

The Editors of the Journal were involved in the investigation and have endorsed the final retraction decisions.

This article has been retracted: please see Elsevier Policy on Article Withdrawal (<https://www.elsevier.com/locate/withdrawalpolicy> ↗).

This article has been retracted at the request of the Editor-in-Chief.

*Note: Os trechos destacados na figura acima foram transcritos de comunicações apresentadas anteriormente neste documento*

59. These ambiguities highlight the need for greater clarity about the decision-making process: were editors actually consulted and actively involved, or was the decision centralized in the Editor-in-Chief (and, if so, which Editor-in-Chief)? The lack of mention of specific names or responsibilities raises questions about the transparency and impartiality of the procedure. Were these the same Editors-in-Chief whose names have been widely mentioned on social media and PubPeer in discussions related to possible conflicts of interest and other ethical issues? Could potential bias or conflicts of interest exist, especially if an Editor-in-Chief was directly involved in, or even co-authored, a retracted article or had collaborations with the authors?
60. Elsevier's response to COPE's pointed question about whether alternatives to retraction were considered (see transcript below), such as corrections or expressions of concern. By stating that they are "not sure they understand the request," Elsevier seems to sidestep the essential issue and avoid discussing whether less drastic alternatives were considered or why they were discarded. This response, which should demonstrate clarity and solid justification, reinforces the impression that decisions were made without carefully examining all possibilities. Furthermore, invoking COPE guidelines as a justification for the retraction while simultaneously failing to address whether the guidelines themselves were followed when considering alternatives seems contradictory. If the goal is scientific integrity and editorial fairness, wouldn't one expect all avenues to be thoroughly explored before deciding as definitive and impactful as retraction? The response avoids the essence of COPE's question and leaves the question of whether the process was conducted with due depth and transparency.

***Please indicate whether the journal considered other options to address the concerns about the articles (e.g. a Correction or an Expression of Concern). If other options to correct the record were considered, please comment on the circumstances that informed the decision to retract.***

While we are not sure if we understand this request given the statement in your message that "We do not interfere with specific editorial decisions", we would note that the investigation (and clear findings) noted above concluded that there was "compromised peer-review or systematic manipulation of the editorial process" on these papers. According to Elsevier's guidelines (cited above, and which follows COPE's own advice on how to deal with systematic manipulation of the publication process), retraction is an appropriate and necessary corrective action for these papers.

61. Elsevier's response to COPE's question about possible editorial conflicts of interest deserves careful consideration (see transcript below). By stating that the allegations related to the journal "*are largely irrelevant to this case*," Elsevier appears to be taking a more general approach without directly addressing how these possible conflicts might impact the broader context. While the promise to investigate all complaints and make the results public is important, the lack of detail about the investigative process or measures to ensure impartiality raises legitimate concerns. Concerns about conflicts of interest, especially when editors are involved in articles under investigation, require close attention. These are peripheral

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issues and essential to ensuring transparency and trust in the editorial process. More precise and detailed responses could help clarify how the journal handles these situations and demonstrate a genuine commitment to COPE guidelines and scientific integrity.

***Dr Malafaia has noted concerns raised in a public forum about the fact that a number of publications in Science of the Total Environment have been handled in ways that deviate from the expectations in COPE guidelines regarding editorial competing interests - for example, there are several articles where the listed handled editor is one of the authors of the article. Can you please comment on this and on the steps that the journal is taking to address this concern, and the assignment of editorial board members to manuscripts more broadly so that competing interests are prevented.***

Any separate allegations currently being investigated and related to the Journal are largely irrelevant to this case, and therefore to this response. However, please note that all complaints regarding the papers published by this journal, including the ones referring to editorial competing interests, will be investigated and the outcome will appear in the public domain.

62. Elsevier's statements, such as "*We have been clear throughout the investigation that we are not accusing Dr. Malafaia directly of peer review manipulation*" and "*The retraction notice is not ascribing blame to any individual(s)*," contrast significantly with the content of the retraction notices (see transcripts below). While these statements seek to dispel individual responsibility, the retraction notices explicitly state that the corresponding author provided "*fictitious email credentials*" and that the resulting reviews "*compromised the editorial process.*" This duality raises important questions: How is it possible that, at the same time, no direct blame is attributed, and yet actions attributed to the corresponding author are so clearly highlighted that they imply a personal failure? Put yourself in my shoes: how should a researcher interpret these messages? If, on the one hand, the official communication claims not to accuse directly but, on the other, describes in detail a sequence of events that suggests personal responsibility, how does this affect the public and professional perception of the case? Furthermore, given the detailed investigative process, with important gaps and an apparent lack of clarity about decisions, would it be possible to prevent this from resulting in erroneous judgments? These reflections are crucial to understanding my case and analyzing how editorial systems deal with investigations of this magnitude. If a researcher, after years of dedication, can face such a scenario of inconsistency and ambiguity, what guarantees are there for other academics who may find themselves in similar situations? These questions transcend an individual case and reach the core of trust in the scientific editorial process.
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Dear Dr Malafaia,

The retraction notice is not ascribing blame to any individual(s)

We have been clear throughout the investigation that we aren't accusing Dr Malafaia directly of peer review manipulation.

This article has been retracted: please see Elsevier Policy on Article Withdrawal (<https://www.elsevier.com/locate/withdrawalpolicy>).

This article has been retracted at the request of the Editors-in-Chief.

Post-publication, an investigation conducted on behalf of the journal by Elsevier's Research Integrity & Publishing Ethics team determined that 2 of the reviews for this manuscript were fictitious. 2 reviews were submitted under the name of a known scientist without their knowledge. The name and fictitious contact details of the reviewers were submitted by the Corresponding Author Guilherme Malafaia during the manuscript submission process. Although the paper was reviewed by additional reviewers chosen by the Editor, this breach compromised the editorial process. The Editors-in-Chief have lost confidence in the validity/integrity of the article and its findings and have determined that it should be retracted.

This article has been retracted: please see Elsevier Policy on Article Withdrawal (<https://www.elsevier.com/locate/withdrawalpolicy>).

This article has been retracted at the request of the Editor-in-Chief.

Post-publication, an investigation conducted on behalf of the journal by Elsevier's Research Integrity & Publishing Ethics team determined that 3 of the reviews for this manuscript were fictitious. 3 reviews were submitted under the name of a known scientist without their knowledge. The name and fictitious contact details of the reviewers were submitted by the Corresponding Author Guilherme Malafaia during the manuscript submission process. Although the paper was reviewed by additional reviewers chosen by the Editor, this breach compromised the editorial process. The Editors-in-Chief have lost confidence in the validity/integrity of the article and its findings and have determined that it should be retracted.

This article has been retracted: please see Elsevier Policy on Article Withdrawal (<https://www.elsevier.com/locate/withdrawalpolicy>).

This article has been retracted at the request of the Editors-in-Chief.

Post-publication, an investigation conducted on behalf of the journal by Elsevier's Research Integrity & Publishing Ethics team determined that 1 of the reviews for this manuscript was fictitious. 1 review was submitted under the name of a known scientist without their knowledge. The name and fictitious contact details of the reviewer was submitted by the Corresponding Author Guilherme Malafaia during the manuscript submission process. Although the paper was reviewed by additional reviewers chosen by the Editor, this breach compromised the editorial process. The Editors-in-Chief have lost confidence in the validity/integrity of the article and its findings and have determined that it should be retracted.

63. As seen in the following transcript, COPE responded promptly to Elsevier's clarifications (November 11, 2024), confirming receipt of the information and highlighting that the response would be reviewed by the subcommittee member in charge of analyzing the case.

### Concerns raised to COPE about notification of retraction for publications in the journal *Science of the Total Environment*

<[REDACTED]@publicationethics.org>

11 de novembro de 2024 às 04:25

Para: "Ethics Expert (ELS)" <[REDACTED]>

Cc:

[REDACTED] Guilherme Malafaia [REDACTED]

Dear Dr Grecea,

Thank you for your response to our request for comments on Guilherme Malafaia's concerns about the notification of retraction for his publications in the journal *Science of the Total Environment*. I have raised this response to the attention of the member of the subcommittee who is reviewing the matter.

With best wishes,

[REDACTED]  
Facilitation and Integrity Officer  
Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE)  
[www.publicationethics.org](http://www.publicationethics.org)

**Note:** This print is included solely for clarification, following the principles of due process and the right to a complete defense, as the Brazilian Federal Constitution guarantees. Personal and sensitive data, such as email addresses, have been redacted in compliance with Brazil's General Data Protection Law (LGPD, Law No. 13,709/2018), as well as global standards such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European Union. This material is presented ethically and within the bounds of international legal frameworks, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which affirm the right to a fair and impartial hearing. The content is provided objectively to highlight essential elements of the case without any intent to expose or harm third parties, ensuring transparency and respect for legal and ethical boundaries.

64. Despite disregarding the process still under analysis by COPE and ignoring the need for greater transparency and dialogue, Elsevier unilaterally proceeded with the retractions. Unfortunately, this attitude goes against the ethical principles recommended by COPE. It demonstrates a stance that neglects the search for a fair process based on concrete evidence, reinforcing the feeling of partiality and arbitrariness in its actions.

65. As soon as the first retraction was published, I sent an email to COPE (see [Appendix 6 - https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1hfgu-93pIFddNiZTT99H7rjm1r7jG4b?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1hfgu-93pIFddNiZTT99H7rjm1r7jG4b?usp=sharing)) presenting a series of direct and critical questions that sought to encourage a clear position from the Committee regarding Elsevier's conduct. I emphasized that, as an organization responsible for promoting ethical standards in scientific publications, it was essential for COPE to evaluate the lack of transparency, the unilateralism of the publisher's actions, and the possible systemic flaws in the editorial process, which included conflicts of interest and contradictions with the ethical guidelines recommended by the Committee itself. I argued that a firm response from COPE was crucial to ensure justice in my case and preserve the credibility of the global ethical process of scientific publishing.
66. To date, I am still waiting to receive a response or formal position from COPE regarding the case, leaving an independent and thorough evaluation of the issues raised pending. Meanwhile, questionable retractions, such as the one highlighted below—which indicates confusion and carelessness on Elsevier's part regarding the corresponding author—undermine confidence in the seriousness with which the entire process was conducted.

Science of the Total Environment 826 (2022) 154046

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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Science of the Total Environment

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/scitotenv](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/scitotenv)



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### Gene expression profiling in liver of zebrafish exposed to ethylhexyl methoxycinnamate and its photoproducts

Bojan Nataraj <sup>a</sup>, Kannan Maharajan <sup>a,b</sup>, Guilherme Malafaia <sup>c,d,e</sup>, Devan Hemalatha <sup>f</sup>, Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim Ahmed <sup>g</sup>, Mathan Ramesh <sup>a,\*</sup>



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\* Corresponding author at: Unit of Toxicology, Department of Zoology, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore 641046, Tamil Nadu, India. E-mail address: [mathanramesh@yahoo.com](mailto:mathanramesh@yahoo.com) (M. Ramesh).

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This article has been retracted: please see Elsevier Policy on Article Withdrawal (<https://www.elsevier.com/locate/withdrawalpolicy>).

This article has been retracted at the request of the Editors-in-Chief.

Post-publication, an investigation conducted on behalf of the journal by Elsevier's Research Integrity & Publishing Ethics team determined that 2 of the reviews for this manuscript were fictitious. 2 reviews were submitted under the name of known scientists without their knowledge. The name and fictitious contact details of the reviewers were submitted by the Corresponding Author Guilherme Malafaia the manuscript submission process. Although the paper was reviewed by additional reviewers chosen by the Editor, this breach compromised the editorial process. The Editors-in-Chief have lost confidence in the validity/integrity of the article and its findings and have determined that it should be retracted.

67. Furthermore, recent publications involving my articles have suggested inconsistencies in editorial handling. While some display “*retraction notice*” in the header, others are labeled as “*short communication*,” and others as “*erratum*” (see examples below). This is curious, as Elsevier itself defines an “erratum” as “a correction of errors introduced to the article by the Publisher” ([source](#)). If an “erratum” implies errors introduced by the publisher, what justifies its application in a retraction context? Does this mean that the “retraction notices” had to be corrected due to editorial errors? What were these errors? Why is there no uniformity in handling publications related to the same author and case? Doesn't the

lack of clarity in this editorial process compromise the transparency and trust in the journal's management?

68. Equally regrettable is the observation that some of COPE's guidelines regarding the content of retraction notices needed to be followed. One of COPE's recommendations is to “*Be objective, factual and avoid inflammatory language.*” (<https://publicationethics.org/retraction-guidelines>). However, the notices (example A below) have used terms such as “*fictitious reviews,*” directly attributing responsibility to the corresponding author without providing publicly verifiable evidence. COPE also advises notices to “*State who is retracting the article.*” Yet, none of the retraction notices identify the Editor, using only the phrase “*at the request of the Editor-in-Chief.*” Who is this editor? Is it one of those whose practices have been publicly questioned on platforms like PubPeer? Or an editor who has co-authored articles with the authors of the retracted papers?
69. Conversely, the retraction texts for my articles (example A), standardized and concise, starkly contrast the approach adopted in other cases. In some retractions, there is a greater effort to contextualize the circumstances, detailing how the process was conducted and how the authors were involved in the investigation (see examples B and C). Some notices clarify the criteria used to verify possible irregularities, such as “*was partly based on the positive advice (...),*” and acknowledge the limitations of the editorial system itself by stating that “*this deception was not detected during the submission process*” (example D). In other cases, authors are treated respectfully by having their disagreements formally recorded, as in the statement: “*The authors disagree with this retraction and dispute the grounds for it.*” How can these discrepancies not be highlighted, and how can one not reflect on the possibility of differentiated treatment? Given the circumstances I have previously outlined, how could I agree to negotiate what would or would not be disclosed in the retraction texts? I would never do so, as I am firmly convinced of my integrity and the integrity of the journals of the co-authors of each publication. What can the scientific community interpret, based on these texts, about the treatment of different investigation cases within Elsevier? Would it not be essential to ensure greater uniformity, transparency, and clarity in these processes to guarantee that all cases are handled fairly and consistently?

This article has been retracted: please see Elsevier Policy on Article Withdrawal (<https://www.elsevier.com/locate/withdrawalpolicy>).

This article has been retracted at the request of the Editor-in-Chief. **(A)**

Post-publication, an investigation conducted on behalf of the journal by Elsevier's Research Integrity & Publishing Ethics team determined that 1 of the reviews for this manuscript was fictitious. 1 review was submitted under the name of a known scientist without their knowledge. The name and fictitious contact details of the reviewer were submitted by the Corresponding Author Guherme Malafala during the manuscript submission process. Although the paper was reviewed by additional reviewers chosen by the Editor, this breach compromised the editorial process. The Editors-in-Chief have lost confidence in the validity/integrity of the article and its findings and have determined that it should be retracted.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2024.177710>

This article has been retracted: please see Elsevier Policy on Article Withdrawal (<https://www.elsevier.com/about/policies/article-withdrawal>).

This article has been retracted at the request of the Editor. **(B)**

Post-publication, the editor discovered suspicious changes in authorship between the original submission and the revised version of this paper. In summary Ali Ahmad, who had not been part of the authorship of the original submission, was added as the new and only Corresponding Author. Shahida Anusha Siddiqui remained as part of the authorship, but no longer as sole Corresponding Author. These changes to the revised paper without explanation and without exceptional approval by the journal editor are contrary to the journal policy on changes to authorship. Both authors were contacted for an explanation. Shahida Anusha Siddiqui confirmed that sole corresponding authorship should be bestowed upon Ali Ahmad, but otherwise failed to provide a satisfactory explanation for these changes. Ali Ahmad did not respond. Overall, the editor feels that the findings of the manuscript cannot be relied upon and that the article needs to be retracted.

The journal apologises for not having identified the problematic authorship changes during the review process and for any resulting inconvenience.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2024.177034>

This article has been retracted: please see Elsevier Policy on Article Withdrawal (<https://www.elsevier.com/about/our-business/policies/article-withdrawal>).

This article has been retracted at the request of the Editors-in-Chief. **(C)**

The article is a duplicate of a paper that had been submitted to *Science of the Total Environment* (STOTEN) on the same day that it was submitted to *Chemosphere*, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2020. The manuscript was peer reviewed by both journals, with STOTEN first registering a 'revise' decision, followed by *Chemosphere* a few weeks later. Both journals invited the authors to submit a revised version, and the corresponding author did this. The revised version submitted to STOTEN was rejected; the one submitted to *Chemosphere* was accepted. Redundant publications outweigh the relative importance of published findings and distort the academic record of the authors. One of the conditions of submission of a paper for publication is therefore that authors declare explicitly that the paper has not been previously published and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. As such this article represents a misuse of the scientific publishing system.

Furthermore, it was noted that despite each journal selecting different people to review the manuscript, significant sections contained in the reports of the reviewers of the manuscript submitted to STOTEN reappeared in the later reports received from the reviewers of the manuscript submitted to *Chemosphere*. All reviewers of the manuscript submitted to *Chemosphere* recommended 'minor revision' and delivered their reports on the same day. Additionally, sections of exactly the same text appears in two of the *Chemosphere* reviewer reports purportedly written by two different reviewers. This suggests a manipulation of the peer-review process and as such represents a clear violation of the fundamentals of peer review, our publishing policies, and publishing ethics standards.

The corresponding author disputes the findings presented above. Paul Oberholster and Anthony Turton were neither aware of nor involved in the submission of this article as described above and should not be considered as co-authors of this article.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chemosphere.2021.131992>

This article has been retracted: please see Elsevier Policy on Article Withdrawal (<https://www.elsevier.com/about/our-business/policies/article-withdrawal>).

This article has been retracted at the request of the Editors-in-Chief. **(D)**

After a thorough investigation, the Editors have concluded that the acceptance of this article was partly based upon the positive advice of one illegitimate reviewer report. The report was submitted from an email account which was provided by the corresponding author CA. Damalas as a suggested reviewer during the submission of the article. Although purportedly a real reviewer account, the Editors have concluded that this was not of an appropriate, independent reviewer.

This manipulation of the peer-review process represents a clear violation of the fundamentals of peer review, our publishing policies, and publishing ethics standards. Apologies are offered to the reviewer whose identity was assumed and to the readers of the journal that this deception was not detected during the submission process.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2019.133597>

This article has been retracted: please see Elsevier Policy on Article Withdrawal (<https://www.elsevier.com/locate/withdrawalpolicy>).

This article has been retracted at the request of the Editors-in-Chief. **(E)**

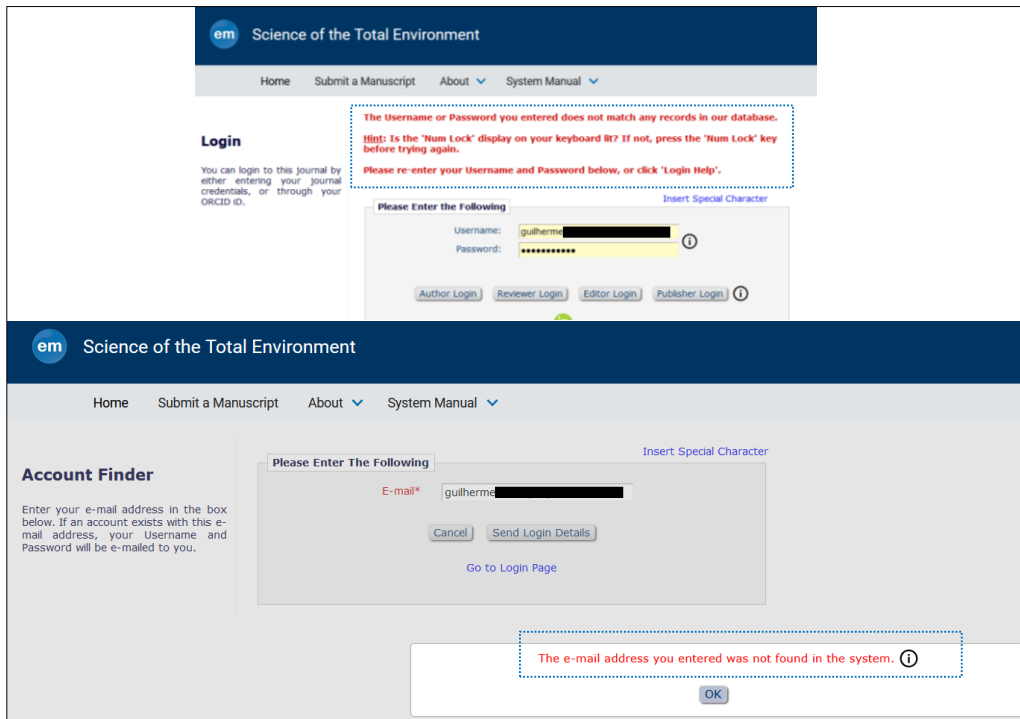
A journal-wide investigation by Elsevier's Research Integrity & Publishing Ethics team identified violations of the journal's policies on authorship and conflict of interest related to the submission and review of this paper.

An authorship change was made during the revision of this paper; an author was removed from the revised paper without validation or authorisation. The authors did not adequately address the concerns raised about the change. In addition, review of this submission was handled by Guest Editor Pau Luke Show despite an extensive record of collaboration, including co-publication, with one of the paper co-authors (Wei-Hsin Chen). This compromised the editorial process and breached the journal's policies.

The authors disagree with this retraction and dispute the grounds for it.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chemosphere.2022.136528>

70. Furthermore, during the process, specifically in September 2024, the publisher blocked my access to the Stoten submission system, preventing me from reviewing or monitoring any details of my submissions. This restriction limits my ability to track the progress of already submitted articles, as well as any changes, deletions, and additions, among other actions (see figure below).



71. Even more concerning, the restriction extended to other Elsevier journals where I also had manuscripts under review, depriving me of receiving updates on those submissions. I sent my first email to the Elsevier Support Team on September 24, 2024 (see transcript below), requesting clarification regarding the restricted access to my accounts. Still, it was only on November 1, 2024, that I received a response confirming the suspension of my access, citing an alleged violation of Elsevier’s policies. However, this communication did not provide clear or specific details about the nature of the alleged violations.

**Date:** Tuesday, September 24, 2024 10:36 PM GMT

Dear Support Team,

I am experiencing difficulties accessing my login for several Elsevier journals where I have articles currently submitted. When attempting to recover my password using my registered e-mails ( [REDACTED] ), the system indicates that these e-mail addresses are not recognized.

Could you please advise on how I should proceed to regain access to my account? Additionally, if it is necessary to create a new registration, I would like to know if my previously submitted articles will be incorporated into the new account or if any additional steps will be required to link them.

Thank you for your attention to this matter, and I look forward to your guidance.

Best regards,

Dr. Guilherme Malafaia

**Note:**

1) This print is included solely for clarification, following the principles of due process and the right to a complete defense, as the Brazilian Federal Constitution guarantees. Personal and sensitive data, such as email addresses, have been redacted in compliance with Brazil's General Data Protection Law (LGPD, Law No. 13.709/2018), as well as global standards such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European Union. This material is presented ethically and within the bounds of international legal frameworks, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which affirm the right to a fair and impartial hearing. The content is provided objectively to highlight essential elements of the case without any intent to expose or harm third parties, ensuring transparency and respect for legal and ethical boundaries.

2) The response received from the Elsevier Support Team on November 1, 2024, will not be presented in full in this document due to the explicit notice contained in the message body advising against the full or partial disclosure of its content without authorization.

72. The decision by Elsevier to block access to my accounts, even before the conclusion of the investigation process, raises important questions. Could this blocking be a form of premature punishment before fully investigating and clarifying the facts? Or could it be an implicit acknowledgment that my account was compromised by unauthorized access, possibly by third parties who obtained my credentials through data leaks on the dark web? According to the Terms and Conditions for all Elsevier websites (<https://www.elsevier.com/en-gb/legal/elsevier-website-terms-and-conditions>), actions such as account blocking may occur in cases of misuse of the provided resources, including activities that compromise the security or integrity of their systems. However, if this is the case, wouldn't it be essential for Elsevier to provide clear evidence that such unauthorized access occurred and to take measures to protect its platform and the users who may have been victims of security breaches?

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73. Finally, as a researcher who deals daily with evidence, calculations, and estimates, I need to emphasize how improbable and disproportionate the scenario reported by Elsevier's Ethics Team appears to be. According to the investigation conducted by the Elsevier Ethics Team, between 2022 and 2023, 33 of my articles published in Stoten were allegedly subjected to peer review manipulation or systematic misconduct. For context, during the manuscript submission process on the Stoten platform, it was mandatory to suggest six reviewers. As reported in the retraction notices for my articles, Elsevier states that in some cases, two of these reviewers were "fictitious," while in others, only one was considered "fictitious." I should note that, on average, each article received feedback from 3 to 4 reviewers, who provided comments in at least two review rounds, resulting in a total of 7 to 8 reviews per article. Assuming a scenario where two "non-genuine" reviewers participated, they would have contributed approximately 55% of the reviews considered by the editor, who presumably made decisions based not only on the quantity but also on the quality and consistency of the reviews. Even if, hypothetically, the reviews deemed "fictitious" by the Elsevier Ethics Team had influenced the acceptance of a single article, the probability of such influence occurring consistently and independently across all 33 articles is drastically reduced to about 0.00000026%. In the second scenario, where only one "non-genuine" reviewer was suggested by me and selected by the editor, their contribution would have been limited to two reviews per article, accounting for approximately 27.47% of the total reviews. In this case, the influence of this reviewer would have been even more limited, as genuine reviewers would have provided the vast majority of reviews (72.53%). Even if we assumed that the review from this single fictitious reviewer had any impact, the probability of it consistently determining the acceptance decisions across all 33 articles is negligible, amounting to only 0.0000000000000000305%.
74. Thus, based on a simple exercise involving simulations and considering that Elsevier states, "*We have been clear throughout the investigation that we aren't accusing Dr. Malafaia directly of peer review manipulation,*" these metrics certainly raise important reflections about the plausibility of the scenario presented in the investigation conducted by the Elsevier Ethics Team, inviting us to examine the circumstances and criteria underpinning the reported conclusions carefully.

In this context, while I am fully aware that my intention is by no means to attack, defame, or discredit any individual or institution (as evidenced by the documents presented in this open letter), I must express that, as a human being, I have faced in recent days a genuine wave of hasty judgments, mockery, and disparaging comments, amplified by social media on both national and international levels. Although, to some extent, I understand that many people do not know who I am or the real facts behind this situation, the experience has been profoundly embarrassing and devastating. I make it clear, with all conviction, that I would never have any motive or intention to manipulate the review process or any stage linked to scientific publications. After 15 years of dedication to research and teaching, values such as ethics, integrity, and transparency are not only principles that I carry with me but that I seek to instill in all the students I educate and, above all, in my four children, who are the purest reflection of what I believe. It is inconceivable to think that any achievements I have attained — relevant publications, scientific contributions, and recognition in my field — were built based on falsifying emails or issuing inauthentic opinions. This situation affects my professional and personal lives, affecting my family, who have indirectly suffered from the repercussions of this case. My intention in addressing this issue goes far beyond personal defense; it is deeply rooted in the preservation of the body of scientific knowledge and the social benefits that the articles, now retracted, have provided. Many of these works result from research carried out with extreme effort and dedication by master's and doctoral students, who invested years of their lives to achieve significant advances in their fields of study. These honest and committed students contributed to science and transformed their personal and professional trajectories through their productions. Some of these students got jobs thanks to their academic degrees, which are directly associated with these articles. There is a real risk that these degrees will be questioned, threatening their careers and families' financial security. This impact goes far beyond the academic sphere, affecting lives and dreams that were built on the knowledge generated by this research. My main goal is to protect the hard work of these people, who trusted me as their advisor and mentor, and to ensure that the knowledge they produced, with such dedication and overcoming countless challenges, continues to benefit society and the scientific community. It is not just about articles; it is about valuing and respecting the human effort that resulted in scientific advances recognized by the scientific community. My greatest desire is to avoid legal conflicts, mainly because I know my financial situation is not up to par with

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Elsevier's financial arsenal. Even so, I believe that the way the process was conducted lacked fairness and transparency. The lack of evidence linking my name to any manipulation in the editorial process, the failure to acknowledge the flaws in the editorial procedures themselves that started the problem in the first place, and even Elsevier's official statement that “*We have been clear throughout the investigation that we are not accusing Dr. Malafaia directly of peer review manipulation,*” make these gaps clear.

In a country like Brazil, where science often faces structural challenges and disproportionate investment in research, I have sought to overcome these barriers through national and international partnerships. Associated with a small institution located in the country's interior (in a city with less than 4,000 inhabitants), I have always strived to expand the network of scientific collaboration, working with dedication to producing profound and relevant knowledge. The science we carry out here is often the result of collective efforts built on the principles of open science and collaborative initiatives, which aim to benefit Brazil and the global scientific community. Would the treatment be different if the circumstances were different, such as greater access to resources, infrastructure, and more robust systems for validation? The reality of science in many parts of the world often puts us at a disadvantage regarding material resources and the perception of equity and recognition of scientific work. Furthermore, the flaws in Elsevier's editorial process, such as the lack of basic checks on submission systems and the lack of transparency in dialogue, raise important questions about shared responsibility. Why are systemic failures in the publishing system not subject to the same scrutiny that falls on the corresponding author? Science and its journalists are essential in shedding light on these issues and ensuring that cases are examined thoroughly and fairly. This moment goes beyond individual impact; it challenges the integrity of systems that should protect and value knowledge. Neglecting context and nuance harms scientists who, even in the face of significant challenges, continue contributing to the global advancement of science.

I conclude this open letter by reaffirming my unwavering commitment to ethical, integral, and transparent science, which must prevail over any interference, systemic flaws, or personal interests. My primary purpose is to protect the scientific legacy that our group has built with great dedication over the years - a body of work that has significantly contributed to scientific progress. It is worth highlighting that the Scopus Citation Indexes, managed by Elsevier itself, amount to over 1,000 citations (1,066) for the 47 articles under retraction, demonstrating the scientific impact of our work. Considering only the 33 articles published in 2022 and 2023 under retraction, these alone have accumulated 549 citations in just two years, averaging 16.6 citations per article during this period. Collectively, these articles received approximately 0.75 citations per day or 22.56 citations per month, underscoring their frequent references by other researchers and their significant role in advancing science. Taking into account the proper considerations of these metrics - which might be significantly higher in more established international contexts compared to the reality of Brazilian research - and acknowledging the national context and the challenges of scientific production in Brazil, it is undeniable that these numbers reflect the recognition and relevance of these publications to the scientific community. All this knowledge, validated by so many other studies and contributing to academic progress, is now at risk due to retractions that, in my view, are disproportionate and lack a fair foundation.

In light of the circumstances presented in this letter, I urge the broader scientific publishing community to consider systemic improvements to prevent similar situations in the future. Adopting robust measures, such as enhanced reviewer identity verification, automated email auditing, and mandatory editor training, could significantly strengthen the integrity of the peer review process. Integrating technologies like artificial intelligence to monitor anomalous patterns and implementing open peer review systems could further foster greater transparency, accountability, and trust within the scientific ecosystem. Though challenging to implement, these reforms are necessary to safeguard the credibility of scientific publishing and uphold the values of fairness and rigor that underpin our work. I invite all readers to reflect on how we can ensure that science continues to be a pillar of progress when the very systems designed to protect it fail to apply rigor and justice to their processes. Scientific integrity can only be preserved with balance and impartiality when analyzing each situation. Thus, I remain hopeful that this case will serve not as a point of division but as a catalyst for meaningful change, ensuring that the scientific community thrives on integrity, collaboration, and excellence principles. I sincerely appreciate your attention and the opportunity to share my perspective, trusting that we can strengthen the values that uphold accurate and impartial science together.

Kind regards,

**Guilherme Malafaia**  
Laboratory of Toxicology Applied to the Environment

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