

SORTEE five years on: taking stock of the Society for Open, Reliable, and Transparent Ecology and Evolutionary biology

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Abstract

In five years, the Society for Open, Reliable, and Transparent Ecology and Evolutionary Biology (SORTEE) has grown from a small network of like-minded researchers into a grassroots, international community. Founded in late 2020, SORTEE works to make ecology and evolutionary biology more open, reliable, and transparent at a time when prevailing incentives in academia often reward novelty and quantity over rigour. The society is run largely by early-career researchers and sustained by volunteers and small donations. Around this community, SORTEE has built a portfolio of services and infrastructure: EcoEvoRxiv, a community-governed preprint and postprint server; an annual virtual conference; monthly Code Clubs; a regular workshop and webinar series; and collaborative meta-research projects. The society also produced the first standardised guidelines for data and code quality control in ecology and evolutionary biology, now used by data editors at multiple journals. Over the next five years, SORTEE aims to build on this momentum to promote evidence-based change in how research is funded, conducted, evaluated, and taught, with a particular focus on education, regional outreach, advocacy, and meta-research to inform science policy. SORTEE offers a model for how volunteer-led communities can help drive cultural change in research.

Keywords: academia, community building, culture change, learned society, open science, public trust, reform, reproducibility, transparency

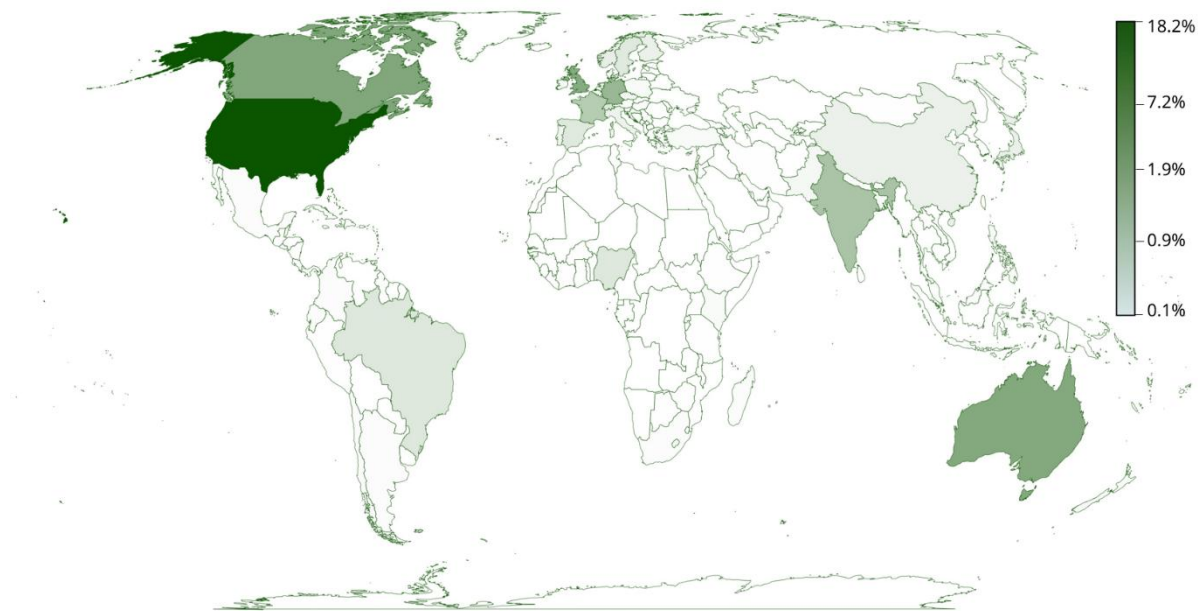
An open science society for ecology and evolutionary biology

Contemporary science struggles with an incentive structure that often rewards novelty and quantity over rigour and reliability (O’Dea et al., 2021). In ecology and evolutionary biology, there is growing awareness of open science practices aimed at addressing this issue, such as data and code sharing, preregistration, and replication (Fraser et al., 2020; Gould et al., 2025; Ivimey-Cook, Sánchez-Tójar, et al., 2025). However, widespread uptake is hampered by incentives created by funders, journals, and other institutions, entrenched norms, the inherent heterogeneity of research methods, and a community fragmented across subdisciplines, regions, and career stages (Culina et al., 2020; Gomes et al., 2022; O’Dea et al., 2021; Roche et al., 2022). Further, evidence varies regarding the extent to which open science practices achieve their stated aims, emphasizing the need for continued metascientific research (e.g., Berberi & Roche, 2022; Claesen et al., 2021; Hardwicke et al., 2018).

The Society for Open, Reliable, and Transparent Ecology and Evolutionary biology (SORTEE) was founded in late 2020 to address these problems (O’Dea et al., 2021; O’Grady, 2020). Five years later, what began as a small network of like-minded researchers has become a grassroots international community engaging hundreds of registered members each year, drawn from over 70 countries (Box 1) and supported by more than 70 active volunteers (representing 14% of our current membership). We use this milestone to reflect on what SORTEE has built and our aims for the next five years.

Box 1. The global distribution of SORTEE’s members and example SORTEE outputs.

Five years of SORTEE members (percentage of membership) by country of residence – 72 countries represented. Data source: self-reported country of residence information from SORTEE members, 2021–2025. Map lines delineate areas that do not necessarily depict accepted national boundaries.



Example research outputs led by SORTEE members and originating from the annual SORTEE conference and working groups or committees.

- Baldoni et al. (2025) [SORTEE community guide: How to start your own code club](#). *OSF*
- Braga et al. (2023) [Not just for programmers: How GitHub can accelerate collaborative and reproducible research in ecology and evolution](#). *Methods Ecol Evol*
- Cabugos et al. (2026) [What do ecology and evolutionary biology journal websites communicate about their policies and preferences regarding replication studies?](#) *EcoEvoRxiv*
- Gould et al. (2025) [Same data, different analysts: Variation in effect sizes due to analytical decisions in ecology and evolutionary biology](#). *BMC Biology*
- Hiltemann et al. (2023) [Galaxy Training: A powerful framework for teaching!](#) *PLOS Comput Biol*
- Ivimey-Cook et al. (2023) [Implementing code review in the scientific workflow: Insights from ecology and evolutionary biology](#). *J Evol Biol*
- Ivimey-Cook et al. (2025) [From policy to practice: Progress towards data- and code-sharing in ecology and evolution](#). *Proc Roy Soc B*
- Ivimey-Cook et al. (2025) [TADA! Simple guidelines to improve analytical code sharing for transparency and reproducibility](#) *EcoEvoRxiv*
- Lagisz et al. (2025) [Priced out of belonging? Insufficient concessions on membership fees across international societies in ecology and evolution](#). *Proc Roy Soc B*
- Lagisz et al. (2026) [Who leads diversity efforts in science? Evidence of minority tax in DEI committees of international learned societies in ecology and evolutionary biology](#). *EcoEvoRxiv*
- Martinig et al. (2026) [Dragon Kill Points: Applying a transparent working template to relieve authorship stress](#). *BMC Biol*
- Nakagawa et al. (2023) [Method Reporting with Initials for Transparency \(MeRIT\) promotes more granularity and accountability for author contributions](#). *Nat Commun*
- Noble et al. (2025). [The promise of community-driven preprints in ecology and evolution](#). *Proc Roy Soc B*
- Pick et al. (2026). [The SORTEE guidelines for data and code quality control in ecology and evolutionary biology](#). *Peer Community J*

Governance and membership

One of SORTEE’s defining features is that it has been run, to a large extent, by the generation of researchers who will shape research culture for decades to come. Early-career researchers (ECRs) make up most of both our Board of Directors and the chairs for our eleven committees, while a Senior Advisory Board composed of later-career researchers helps provide longer-term perspective and mentorship.

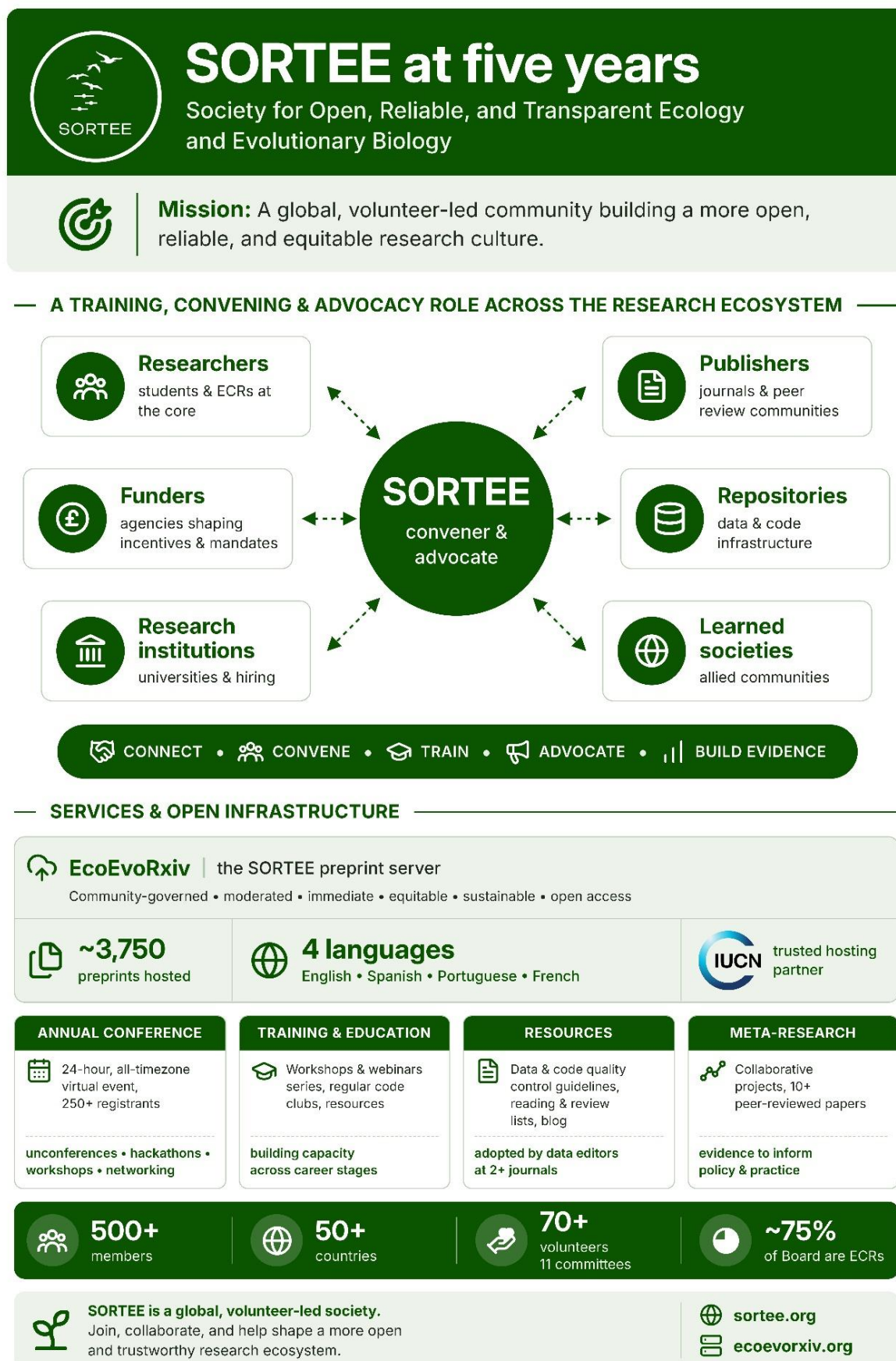
SORTEE’s leadership diffuses responsibilities throughout the organization by promoting opportunities for member participation and contribution. Our membership fees are optional and inexpensive (USD 0–40 annually). This membership model means that, so far, the society has run on the dedication of volunteers and small donations from individuals and other organizations. We believe this has facilitated substantial engagement of ECRs, as well as strong and growing participation from regions historically under-represented in ecological and evolutionary biology research. Recently, SORTEE has launched a network of regional chapters (Brazil, Canada, South Asia), and we continue to expand our representation of SORTEE at conferences of relevant scientific societies around the world.

Services and infrastructure at the 5-year mark

The SORTEE community has built a portfolio of services that help researchers adopt open, transparent, and reproducible research practices (Fig. 1). The most visible of these is EcoEvoRxiv, our community-governed, moderated preprint and postprint platform for ecology, evolutionary biology, and related disciplines (ecoevorxiv.org; Noble et al., 2025). EcoEvoRxiv now hosts close to 4,000 preprints and accepts submissions in English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and other languages for which there is capacity within the EcoEvoRxiv committee. It is also a trusted partner of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which uses the platform to host openly accessible ‘Red List of Ecosystems’ reports.

SORTEE’s flagship event is its annual 24-hour virtual conference. Spanning all time zones, the conference attracts hundreds of participants every year. Hands-on workshops, hackathons, discussion sessions (‘unconferences’), and informal social mixers sit alongside plenary presentations and dedicated introductions for researchers entirely new to open science. Conference sessions facilitate collaboration and have produced a range of tangible outcomes. For instance, hackathon participants crowd-sourced outreach to journals to promote progressive publication policies, and multiple hackathons have led to peer-reviewed outputs on topics ranging from collaborative GitHub workflows for reproducible ecological research to scalable training frameworks in computational biology, transforming conference time into community-owned resources (Box 1). Further, the conference brings researchers together to design and conduct meta-research studies that inform the continued development and implementation of tools and policy to improve the reliability of our science.

Through the Advocacy Committee, another notable SORTEE accomplishment has been promoting and facilitating a role for journal data editors to oversee quality-control of data and code. Working with 22 data editors across six journals, SORTEE produced the first standardised set of guidelines for data and code quality control in ecology and evolutionary biology (Pick et al., 2026). These guidelines, which consist of six stages pertaining to data reuse, transparency, and computational reproducibility, are used by data editors at multiple journals, and have been formally adopted by two ‘Peer Community In’ (PCI) platforms (Class et al., 2026).



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Figure 1. SORTEE at a glance: the society’s mission, activities, services, and membership at 5 years.

Year-round, SORTEE runs monthly Code Clubs for hands-on training in reproducible coding, a regular workshop and webinar series, and the SORTEE Commendation Awards that recognise contributions to open and reproducible research practices. Additionally, members have collaborated on over a dozen meta-research projects to date, with several peer-reviewed articles published (Box 1). SORTEE publishes open-science resources, including a curated open-science reading list, a quarterly newsletter, blog posts, and infographics. A community-maintained list of open-science-friendly peer reviewers helps editors quickly identify expertise, and active social media channels disseminate these outputs to a wider audience. All of these community-built outputs are free to use and adapt and can be found at <https://sortee.org>.

The next five years

In its first five years, SORTEE built a community and infrastructure to support it. Over the next five years, we aim to build on this momentum and contribute to evidence-based change in how ecology and evolutionary biology research is funded, conducted, evaluated, and taught. For instance, we anticipate major benefits to training in open science practices being included earlier in the education pipeline. Undergraduate curricula and graduate training programmes could address questions of reliability as a core scientific consideration, and introduce open science practices as core activities, not optional add-ons. SORTEE's Code Clubs, workshops, and annual conference could serve as models and foundations for this mission. With sufficient resources, SORTEE could expand our educational activities by providing hands-on workshops for educators to receive the requisite training to teach open science practices in their courses (e.g., Baldoni et al., 2025).

We are already making important strides to extend SORTEE's activities where open-science infrastructure is least supported, and we will work to do much more. The regional chapter model – where members located in or originating from a particular region connect to discuss, address and promote open science locally – was first launched in Brazil and offers a way to facilitate this without imposing a single cultural template.

Continuing our advocacy in support of open, reliable, and transparent ecology and evolutionary biology (<https://sortee.org/positionstatements>), we will pursue further engagement with journals and, ultimately, with funders, publishers, and other institutions. Our success in promoting data editors and in creating data guidelines adopted by journals exemplify the value of this engagement. The goal of these ambitious efforts would be to align policies and reward structures with the practices identified as most effective for better research, a task that will require major coalition building.

Importantly, SORTEE will continue to promote meta-research in ecology and evolutionary biology so that we can move from mostly describing problems with our research culture to testing hypotheses about the impacts of interventions on improving that culture. We want to generate the evidence base that policymakers need to better design interventions that actually improve science (e.g., evidence-informed incentives, mandates, assessment frameworks).

Building culture for the next generation

None of our goals will be accomplished by a single society. SORTEE's premise has always been that the obstacles to open, transparent, and reliable science are collective problems, and so the process of designing and implementing solutions must also be collective. The society's first five years showed that a global community can be assembled around that premise, on volunteer time and modest means. As our community grows, and we seek a more ambitious resource base to advance our work, the task ahead will be to promote routine adoption of practices that effectively support more open, transparent and reliable science, ensuring that the next generation of ecologists and evolutionary biologists inherits a research culture we can be proud of. Our ultimate goal, of course, is that these desirable practices become so widespread as to make SORTEE

obsolete. Until then, researchers, students, publishers, institutions, and others interested in joining or partnering with SORTEE can find out more at <https://sortee.org>.

Acknowledgements

The authors have contributed to SORTEE in a leadership position, as members of the Board of Directors, Executive Committee, and/or by chairing a committee. We thank SORTEE members and supporting organizations (<https://sortee.org/supporters>) for their important contributions to the society, with particular thanks to committee members.

Author contributions

Drafting: THP, DGR, REO, ERIC, MP. Visualization: DGR, ERIC, ML, REO, AST. Review and approval: all authors.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts on interest.

Data and code availability

The data and code for the map in Box 1 are available through Zenodo:
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23526473>

AI disclosure

We used Claude Opus 5.5 to help with the graphic design of Figure 1 ‘SORTEE at a glance’.

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