



What's true about the forest? Millions of people use Wikipedia to find the facts. Photo: Mats Harnerz

SLU pioneer contributions to Wikipedia

SLU, the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, is the first university in the world that officially and actively contribute with knowledge on Wikipedia.

Wikipedia has become the largest and most used reference work on the Internet with an estimated 365 million readers worldwide. Its role as a source of knowledge for the public continues to increase. Search engines almost exclusively give top ranking to Wikipedia pages.

Students use it on a daily basis, even at the university level. It is therefore natural for SLU to want to contribute and validate the content of Wikipedia articles within its fields of expertise.

The Wikipedia project at SLU was launched in January 2013. The initiative came from a dedicated researcher, Olle Terenius, and the idea was endorsed by the university



Olle Terenius initiated the Wikipedia project at SLU. He is an ecologist working with insects, immunity and infections.

Photo: Jenny Svernäs-Gillner SLU

administration. With financial support from Formas, a "Wikipedian in Academy"* was hired for helping researchers to get started.

* A Wikipedian in Academy (more commonly referred to as Wikipedian in Residence) is a role which aims to serve as a liaison between the organization and the Wikimedia community to promote a mutually beneficial cooperation.

Olle Terenius acknowledges that the Internet has become the major source of information for journalists, students and researchers. Wikipedia articles are often considered sufficiently reliable for the needs of the public, but when experts check their specific areas of interest, they often find mistakes or information gaps.

– As experts, we have an obligation to spread our knowledge to a wider audience, he says. Wikipedia is a fantastic place to disseminate our findings, since it is used by millions of people.

He stresses that a Wikipedia contribution can be made with a minimal effort. A five-minute job to correct a reference or adding a sentence can change an article from being incorrect to correct, thus benefiting the readers.

– Unlike information channels, with long processing times, Wikipedia

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gives the writer instant satisfaction. Many writers also get feedback from other readers.

15 languages

Most of the work is done on the Swedish version of Wikipedia, but SLU has prepared pages for 15 different languages, to allow, for example, guest researchers to write on their own languages.

– The English Wikipedia is usually quite reliable, but articles in less widespread languages need more elaboration, says Olle Terenius.

Researchers at SLU write for Wikipedia with a clear affiliation to the institution and, thus, their contribution can be traced in the article history. One goal is that at least 100 researchers will contribute articles, or parts of articles, over the one-year project. So far, about 30–40 researchers are registered as contributors.

The third task

One of them is Associate professor Lars Lundqvist at SLU in Umeå. His fields of expertise are within silviculture, and particularly continuous-cover forestry. To date, he has a long list of topics for which new texts are needed, or where existing texts need amending.

Why is he devoting time to the Wikipedia project?

– The university has a responsibility to inform the public. This “third task”, alongside research and education, needs much more attention. Wikipedia is one of many channels we can use for the task, but a very important channel since so many people use it, he says.

He observes that many articles on forests and forestry are superficial and sometimes contain misleading information. As a researcher, he has a responsibility to correct it. His students often use Wikipedia for their project work. By improving the content, he also ensures that they find relevant facts.

– Many new terms, such as those related to continuous-cover forestry,



Lars Lundqvist: “Informing the public is one of the responsibilities for a scientist. The Wikipedia project is a good project in that sense”. Photo: Mats Hannerz

were missing from Wikipedia. I have been able to add information on those, he says.

Is it worthwhile to spend time on popular science and public education? Lars Lundqvist hesitates somewhat about the answer, but concludes that the answer is “No” – at least not for academic positions, where scientific publication overshadows other activities. But he would like to see a more positive attitude towards popular science.

– A good scientist must also be able to show that he or she can disseminate their results and make them understandable to others.

The Wikipedia project at SLU is pioneering, in a global context, in the way that a university cooperates officially with the Wikimedia foundation. So far, Wikipedia projects linked to universities have been based on student contributions and individual researchers.

A sentence from the project description provides a good reason for collaborating with Wikipedia: “Let’s get the experts at SLU to publish information where everyone reads it!”

About Wikipedia (from Wikipedia):

Wikipedia is a collaboratively edited, multilingual, free Internet encyclopaedia supported by the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation. It was launched on January 15, 2001, by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger. Sanger coined the name Wikipedia, which is a portmanteau of wiki (a type of collaborative website, from the Hawaiian word wiki, meaning “quick”) and encyclopaedia. In early 2013, Wikipedia has 26 million articles in 286 languages.

The open nature of Wikipedia has led to various concerns, such as the quality of writing, the amount of vandalism and the accuracy of information. Some articles contain unverified or inconsistent information, though a 2005 investigation in Nature showed that the science articles they compared came close to the level of accuracy of Encyclopaedia Britannica and had a similar rate of “serious errors”.