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Editorial board membership and citation elite status in sustainability science journals

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Abstract

This study investigates whether editorial board members (EBMs) of sustainability science journals occupy positions of prominence in terms of scholarly and societal impact. Using data from 29 Scopus-indexed journals, we analyzed 80,709 publications (2020-2024) and identified 2,120 editors. We assessed the degree to which EBM-authored or coauthored publications appeared among highly cited works and were cited in policy documents and patents. EBM publications constituted a minority of total research output; however, they accounted for a significantly larger share of the most highly cited papers and those referenced in policy documents, while less represented among patent-cited works. Odds ratio analyses further revealed that, relative to non-EBM publications, EBM outputs were significantly more likely to be highly cited and to inform policy, yet less likely to be cited in patents. These findings indicate that EBMs publications are associated with greater scholarly prestige and policy relevance but show weaker links to technological impact.

1. Introduction

Scientific knowledge is shaped by the institutions and actors that govern scholarly communication (Morgan et al., 2018). Within this ecosystem, academic journal editors play a crucial role as gatekeepers, determining which ideas gain legitimacy and influence within their respective research fields (de-Marcos et al., 2024). This influence is particularly pronounced in sustainability science, a relatively young and inherently transdisciplinary domain that extends beyond academic discourse to engage with policymakers, practitioners, and societal stakeholders (Clark & Harley, 2020). The power of editors stems from their strategic position at the intersection of intellectual, institutional, and professional networks, allowing them to influence what is published and, by extension, the dominant research paradigms. Editors not only adjudicate between competing academic perspectives but also define the boundaries of scientific legitimacy (Goyanes et al., 2022). Scholars serving on multiple editorial boards may occupy influential positions within scholarly networks and facilitate connections between journals, institutions, and research communities. Editorial positions are also a source of social capital, enabling those who hold them to expand their influence within scientific networks (Bourdieu, 1986).

Prior research suggests that editorial boards are not randomly composed: internationally diverse boards often align with stronger citation visibility (Nisonger, 2002). Journals' reputations may benefit when their editorial teams maintain strong research activity (Xie et al., 2019). Consistent

with this, evidence from multiple disciplines shows that editors of high-impact journals tend to have stronger bibliometric achievements (Asnafi et al., 2017; Kay et al., 2017). Further, editorial board members (EBMs) are typically researchers with strong publication records and high citation counts, as these indicators of research productivity and citation impact signal scholarly reputation and competence in the peer-review process (Lowe & Van Fleet, 2009; Miró et al., 2017). EBMs are also frequently active researchers whose publication visibility supports their inclusion (Zdeněk & Lososová, 2018). Despite these findings, an important gap remains. Existing research primarily conceptualizes editorial quality as a journal-level attribute, typically measured through indicators such as Source Normalized Impact per Paper (SNIP), CiteScore, and SCImago Journal Rank (SJR) among others. In contrast, far less attention has been given to whether EBMs themselves constitute a citation elite and whether their influence extends beyond academia into broader societal domains. This motivates our study, which advances the discussion from general assumptions about editorial prestige toward measurable, multi-dimensional indicators of scholarly and societal influence. Hence, we forwarded the following three research questions (RQ):

RQ1: To what extent do the editorial board members belong to the citation elite in their research area?

RQ2: What proportion of publications authored or co-authored by editorial board members receive citations in policy documents?

RQ3: How often are editorial board members' publications cited in patents?

RQ1 addresses whether editorial board membership systematically overlaps with citation elite status within editor's research area, testing the implicit assumption that boards are populated by field-leading scholars. We consider researchers part of the citation elite if their citations count place them in the top percentiles (the top 1% or 10%, field-weighted) of their research field for a given publication year, using citation numbers that have been adjusted for differences across disciplines and time. Researchers who reach this threshold are considered part of the citation elite because they receive a much larger share of total citations and have high scholarly visibility (Kladakis et al., 2024; Korom, 2020; Parker et al., 2010). Simultaneously, RQ2 and RQ3 extend beyond academic citation systems by measuring whether EBMs' work is visible in policy documents and patents, capturing evidence of broader societal and technological impact.

Together, these research questions allow the study to distinguish between two competing interpretations of editorial prestige: (1) editorial boards are primarily composed of research leaders who also generate high-impact outputs across scholarly and applied domains, or (2) editorial roles reflect status, networks, or institutional reputation more than exceptional performance and cross-sector influence. The outcomes sought are therefore not merely descriptive; they test whether editorial boards function as a mechanism that consolidates academic elites and whether this consolidation is mirrored in real-world knowledge uptake. The results can be used by journals and publishers to improve transparency in editorial recruitment (e.g., balancing expertise, impact, and diversity etc.), by universities to better understand how editorial service aligns with research excellence and societal impact, and by evaluators to refine responsible metrics for academic leadership.

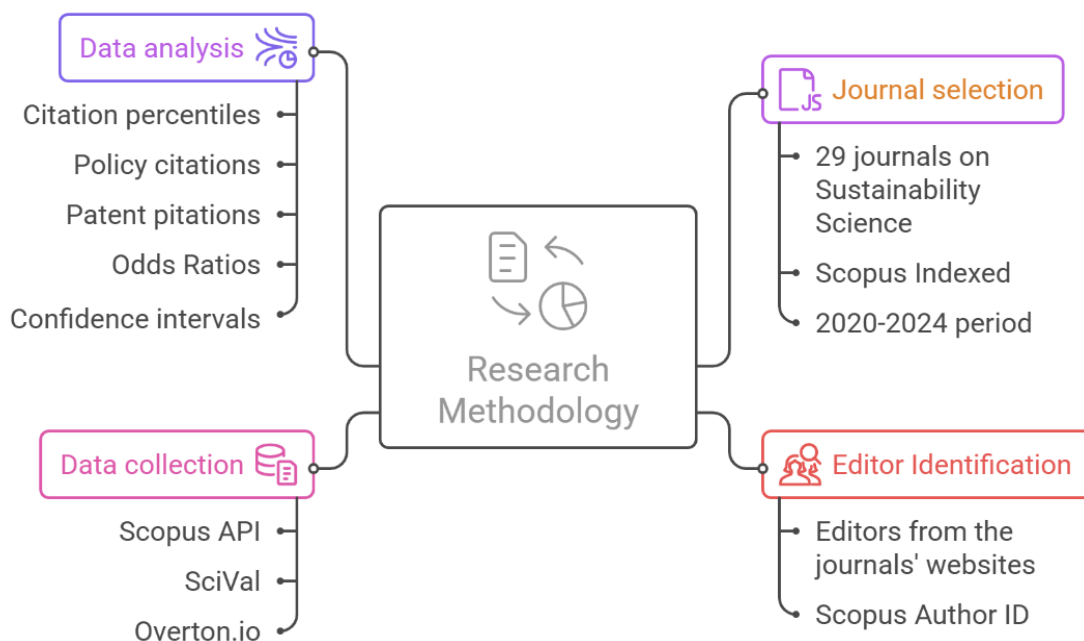
This paper extends prior research by moving beyond the observation that editorial boards correlate with journal impact. It instead highlights editorial boards as active actors within the science system with policy-relevant roles. In doing so, this paper links editorial status to elite scholarly positioning, stratification in publishing practices, and the measurable translation of research into policy and innovation.

2. Data and Method

We selected 29 sustainability science journals (see appendix A) published between 2020 and 2024 and indexed in Scopus. Sustainability science was chosen for its interdisciplinary scope and strong relevance to societal and policy issues. For each journal, we compiled the names of all individuals holding editorial roles, including Editors-in-Chief, Co-Editors, Associate Editors, Executive Editors, Managing Editors, and related positions (hereafter ‘editors’). We first recorded the EBMs listed on each journal's website during January 2025. For each editor, we collected full names, institutional affiliations, and country information as reported on the journal websites. When an individual served on multiple editorial boards, they were treated as single individuals at the aggregated level. The resulting dataset represents the contemporary composition of editorial boards. The publication records of these editors were then analyzed for the 2020–2024 period. This resulted in a total of 2,120 unique editors. The editorial dataset partly derives from a network-analytical study of editorial governance (Schirone, 2026).

We used the Scopus API (Application Programming Interface) to retrieve Scopus Author IDs for each editor. Author IDs were identified using automated name matching and affiliation-based verification implemented in R. This procedure identified valid Scopus Author IDs for 1,823 editors (86% of the sample). In cases where an editor was associated with multiple Scopus Author IDs, all IDs linked to that individual were retained to reduce the risk of undercounting the editor’s publication output. Restricting the matching procedure to Scopus Author IDs prioritizes precision and reduces the likelihood of false-positive author matches. Figure 1 illustrates the data collection process and the overall methodological workflow.

Figure 1: Data and methods workflow.



In January 2026, data were downloaded from Scopus, resulting in a dataset of 80,709 publications, including 73,208 articles (91%) and 7,491 reviews (9%) across 29 journals. Editorial materials were not included because they are frequently authored by editors and are not comparable to research articles and reviews. Publications from 2025 were also excluded to ensure completeness and comparability across years, as indexing delays and ongoing publication processes may lead to incomplete coverage for the most recent year. We found that 1,317 (72%) of the 1,823 editors had at least one publication in the dataset.

Table 1: Distribution of publications by editors in subsets.

Categories	Number of publications	No. of publications where editors are involved	Number of editors (N = 1,823)
Total publications	80,709	7,995 (10%)	1,317 (72%)
Top 10% citation percentile	17,034	1,952 (11%)	802 (44%)
Top 1% citation percentile	1,277	265 (21%)	237 (13%)
Policy cited publications	10,787	1,639 (15%)	730 (40%)
Patent cited publications	3,291	236 (7%)	159 (9%)

Using SciVal's (SciVal.com) field-weighted normalized indicators, we identified 1,277 and 17,034 publications belonging to the top 1% and top 10% citation percentiles, within our dataset of 80,709 publications (see Table 1). The top 1% and top 10% citation percentiles identify the most-cited publications worldwide within the same field, year, and document type, based on field-weighted citation impact (Waltman & Schreiber, 2013). Publications in this top group indicate exceptional impact, visibility, and recognition in the research community, showing that the work is widely used and has a clear influence on others research (Lancho-Barrantes & Cantu-Ortiz, 2021).

Further, we identified publications that received at least one policy citation. SciVal sources policy document data from the Overton database (see overton.io), which links policy documents to scholarly outputs primarily through DOI-based reference matching (Elsevier, 2026). Policy citations occur when research outputs are cited in policy documents produced by organizations such as think tanks (e.g., Peace Research Institute Oslo; Kiel Institute for the World Economy, etc.), intergovernmental organizations (e.g., the World Bank; the United Nations, etc.), or governments (e.g., Swedish parliament; Belgian federal public services, etc.). Policy citation suggests that the research has informed policy development or decision-making processes beyond academia (Haunschild & Bornmann, 2017). We also identified publications that received at least one patent citation. Patent citations occur when scholarly publications are referenced in patent documents to acknowledge prior knowledge relevant to an invention. A citation from a patent document indicates that the research has contributed to technological development or innovation (Dorta-González et al., 2024). We found that 10,787 publications received citations from policy documents, while 3,291 publications received citations from patent documents (see Table 1).

To address the research questions, we developed R scripts to match the 1,823 editors to each publication subset. This matching was performed across all Scopus Author IDs associated with each editor. We then calculated editor-level indicators reflecting (1) membership in the citation elite (top 1% or 10% citation percentile thresholds), (2) the frequency of policy-cited publications, and (3) occurrence of publications cited in patents. Table 1 shows that overall, 7,995 publications (10%) were published by 1,317 editors (72%). The proportion is higher among highly cited papers, with 1,952 publications (11%) in the top 10% citation percentile and 265 publications (21%) in the top 1%, published by 802 (44%) and 237 (13%) editors, respectively. Additionally, 1,639 policy-cited publications (15%) were published by 730 editors (40%), while 236 patent-cited publications (7%) were published by 159 editors (9%).

Odds ratios (OR) (Pagano & Gauvreau, 2018) were calculated to assess the strength of association between publications authored by EBM publications and selected impact indicators (e.g., top 10% and top 1% citation percentiles policy citations, and patent citations). An OR greater than 1 indicates that EBM publications have higher odds of exhibiting the respective impact indicator

compared with non-EBM publications, whereas an OR below 1 indicates lower odds.

The OR was calculated as $OR = \frac{ad}{bc}$, where

a = number of EBM publications with the indicator,

b = number of EBM publications without the indicator,

c = number of non-EBM publications with the indicator,

d = number of non-EBM publications without the indicator.

The precision of the estimated associations was assessed using 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for each odds ratio (OR), indicating the range within which the true population OR is expected to fall. The 95% CIs were estimated using $CIs = e^{\ln(OR) \pm 1.96\sqrt{1/a+1/b+1/c+1/d}}$. Associations were considered statistically significant when the 95% CIs did not include the null value (OR = 1). Narrower confidence intervals indicate greater precision in the estimated effect.

3. Results and Discussion

Our dataset provides a multifaceted picture of the research and impact profile of the editors. Table 1 shows that 1,317 editors (72%) produced 7,995 publications, accounting for about 10% of the dataset's total output. On average, each publishing editor authored or co-authored around six publications, though the underlying distribution is almost certainly skewed, with some editors being far more prolific than others. Among all publications, 17,034 fall within the top 10% citation percentile, of which 1,952 (11%) include at least one editor. This share is very close to the editors' overall publication share, suggesting that, at the level of 'highly cited' (top 10%) outputs, editor-authored or editor-coauthored publications perform broadly in line with their overall share of publications in the dataset.

However, the pattern becomes more pronounced at the extreme high end. There are 1,277 publications in the top 1% citation percentile, and 265 of these (21%) include at least one editor as an author or co-author. This is almost double their overall share of publications, indicating a disproportionately high representation of editor-associated publications among the most highly cited outputs. At the individual level, 802 editors (44%) are associated with at least one top 10% cited publication, and 237 (13%) with at least one top 1% cited publication. These figures indicate that a substantial proportion of editors have contributed to highly cited research outputs, with a smaller but notable group linked to exceptionally influential publications.

The policy and patent citation data suggest differentiated patterns of societal versus technological impact. Among 10,787 policy-cited publications in the dataset, 1,639 (15%) involve editors, which is higher than their overall share of publications. This indicates that editors' outputs are strongly represented among research that attracts attention in by policy bodies, suggesting a relatively strong alignment of at least part of their work with policy-relevant topics. A total of 730 (40%) editors is associated with at least one policy-cited paper, pointing to a broad spread of policy-relevant activity across the editorial group rather than a very small number of specialists.

In contrast, editor representation in patent-cited publications appears more modest. Of 3,291 patent-cited publications, only 236 (7%) involve editors, well below their 10% share of all publications. Just 159 (9%) editors are linked to at least one patent-cited publication. This pattern suggests that, while some editors contribute to work with applied technological impact, their overall presence in patent-cited research remains limited relative to their share of publications in the dataset.

Table 2: Association between editor involvement and research impact indicators: odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals (CIs).

Indicator	All pub. (N = 80,709)	EBM pub. (N = 7,995)	Non-EBM pub. (N = 72,714)	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Top 10% cited	17,034	1,952 (11%)	15,082 (89%)	1.23	1.17 - 1.30
Top 1% cited	1,277	265 (21%)	1,012 (79%)	2.43	2.12 - 2.79
Policy cited	10,787	1,639 (15%)	9,148 (85%)	1.69	1.69 - 1.90
Patent cited	3,291	236 (7%)	3,055 (93%)	0.70	0.61 - 0.79

Table 2 presents the comparison of research impact indicators between EBM publications and non-EBM publications. Overall, EBM publications show a higher likelihood of achieving several impact indicators compared with non-EBM publications. Specifically, EBM publications were more likely to belong to the top 10% most cited publications (OR = 1.23, CI: 1.17 - 1.30).

The difference was more pronounced for the top 1% most cited publications, where EBM publications had more than twice the odds of appearing in this group compared with non-EBM publications (OR = 2.43, CI: 2.12 - 2.79). Similarly, EBM publications were significantly more likely to be cited in policy documents (OR = 1.69, CI: 1.69 - 1.90). Notably, EBM publications were less likely to be cited in patents compared with non-EBM publications (OR = 0.70, CI: 0.61 - 0.79). These results indicate that editor-involved publications tend to exhibit higher citation and policy impact but slightly lower patent citation rates.

Figure 2: Editorial authorship across research impact indicators (OR with 95% CIs).

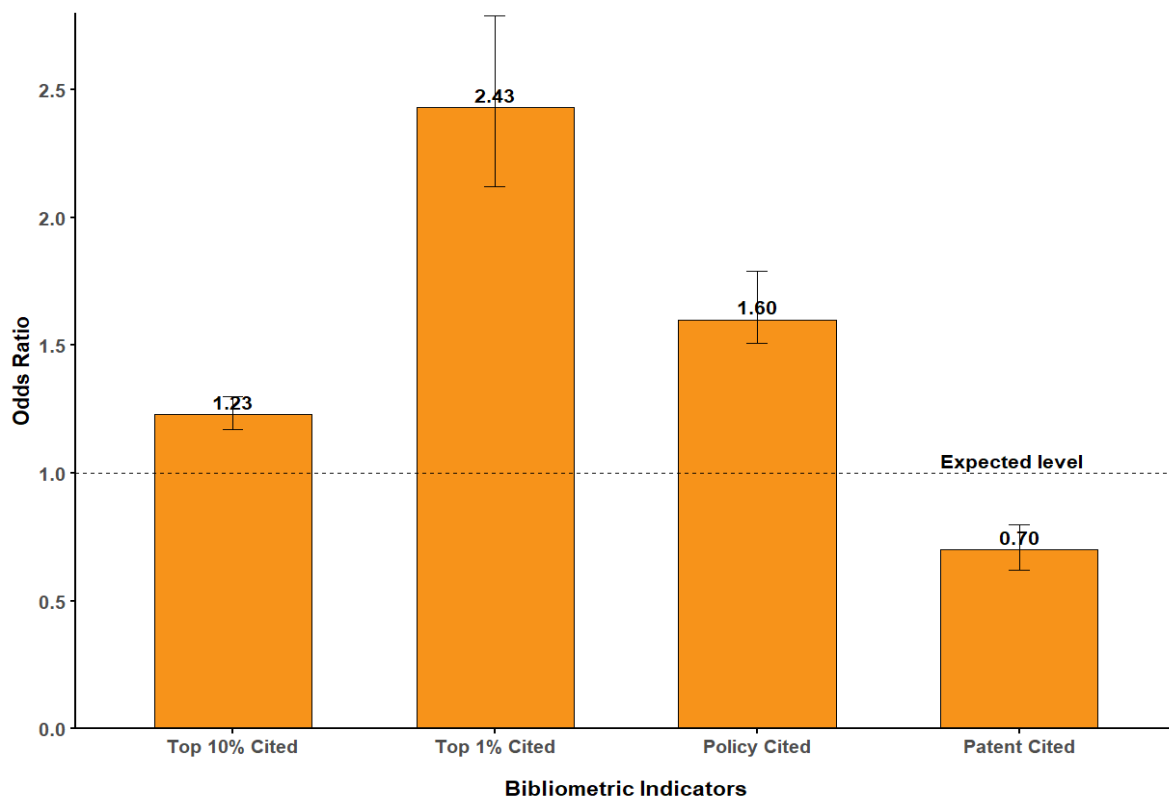


Figure 2 shows the OR with 95% CIs comparing EBM publications and non-EBM publications across four impact indicators. The dashed line at OR = 1 represents no difference between the two groups. EBM publications are more likely to be highly cited, particularly in the top 1% cited papers and top 10% cited papers. EBM publications are also more likely to be cited in policy documents. However, EBM publications are less likely to be cited in patents. Overall, EBM publications show higher academic and policy impact, but lower patent-related impact compared with non-EBM publications.

The findings suggest that publications involving EBMs are associated with higher citation and societal impact (Karanja et al., 2022). EBM publications show significantly greater odds of being among the top 10% and top 1% most cited publications, indicating stronger visibility and influence within the scientific literature. Additionally, the higher likelihood of policy citations suggests that these publications may have greater relevance for evidence-based policymaking. Several factors may contribute to this pattern, including the established expertise, research networks, and visibility of EBMs within their respective fields. However, the lower odds of patent citations among EBM publications may indicate that these works are more strongly oriented toward fundamental or policy-relevant research rather than directly patentable technological applications. These results highlight differences in the impact profiles of EBM and non-EBM publications and inform discussions regarding editorial roles and research influence in scholarly publishing.

Taken together, these patterns point to a differentiated impact structure associated with editorial board participation. While EBM publications appear to be strongly embedded within highly cited and policy-relevant knowledge domains, their comparatively lower representation in patent citations indicates that their influence may be concentrated primarily within academic and policy spheres rather than within technological innovation systems. At the same time, these findings should be interpreted with caution. The observed associations may partly reflect selection effects, as EBMs are typically senior and highly productive scholars whose work already commands greater visibility within the scientific community. Consequently, the relationship between editorial roles and publication impact may be driven less by editorial position itself than by underlying differences in author's reputation, network centrality, and cumulative advantage in scholarly communication.

4. Conclusion

We found that EBMs' publications are more frequently represented among highly cited research outputs, suggesting a strong association between editorial roles and citation elite performance. These patterns indicate that editorial board members are disproportionately represented among citation elite publications and policy-cited research. This association may reflect greater research visibility, established academic reputation, and extensive professional networks. At the same time, the results should be interpreted within the broader framework of cumulative advantage in science, where established scholars who are more likely to serve on editorial boards already occupy influential positions within the research system. These findings indicate that editorial roles may interact with existing structures of scientific recognition, shaping patterns of citation impact and reinforcing stratification within the scholarly community.

This study has several limitations. First, EBMs are often senior, well-established scholars, and the higher impact of their publications may partly reflect selection effects rather than editorial influence. Second, the analysis does not consider the disciplinary differences within and other factors such as author seniority, institutional prestige, collaboration patterns, or funding support, which may also influence citation and societal impact indicators. A further limitation is that editorial board membership was captured at a single point in time (year 2025). Consequently,

some individuals included in the analysis may not have held editorial roles during the entire 2020–2024 publication window. The results should therefore be interpreted as describing the impact profiles of current EBMs rather than as evidence that editorial positions cause in research impact. Future research could address these limitations using matched comparison approaches, multivariate models, or longitudinal designs comparing editorial boards across time periods to better isolate the role of editorial involvement.

Open science practices

Publication data were retrieved from Scopus, a proprietary database, with bibliometric indicators sourced from SciVal, its associated analytics platform. These tools were selected for their standardized metrics, including field-weighted citation percentiles (top 1% and top 10%), as well as policy and patent citation metrics essential to this study. The R code, documentation, and full list of publication DOIs (Publications_DOIs.txt) are publicly available at https://github.com/marcoschirone/editor_impact_project. This study adheres to the FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable) principles. The shared DOIs make source publications findable and traceable. Access via Scopus and SciVal allows authorized researchers to retrieve the bibliographic data needed to independently reconstruct the dataset. The R code ensures interoperability through a structured, executable workflow applicable across research environments, and enhances reusability by enabling others to verify the analysis, adapt the workflow, or extend it to new bibliometric studies.

Author contributions

Both authors contributed equally to conceptualization, methodology, data collection & curation, data analysis, writing and editing. Both authors approved the final manuscript and share equal responsibility for its content.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Appendix -A

Sl. No.	Journal title	ISSN
1)	ACS Sustainable Chemistry & Engineering	2168-0485
2)	Agronomy for Sustainable Development	1774-0746
3)	Annual Review of Environment and Resources	1543-5938
4)	ChemSusChem	1864-5631
5)	Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability	1877-3435
6)	Earth System Governance	2589-8116
7)	Ecological Economics	0921-8009
8)	Ecology and Society	1708-3087
9)	Environment, Development and Sustainability	1387-585X
10)	Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions	2210-4224
11)	Environmental Research Letters	1748-9326
12)	Global Environmental Change	0959-3780
13)	Green Chemistry	1463-9262
14)	IEEE Transactions on Sustainable Energy	1949-3029
15)	International Journal of Precision Engineering and Manufacturing – Green Technology	2288-6206
16)	International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education	1467-6370
17)	International Journal of Sustainable Development & World	1350-4509
18)	Journal of Cleaner Production	0959-6526
19)	Journal of Industrial Ecology	1088-1980
20)	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	0966-9582
21)	Nature Sustainability	2398-9629
22)	Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews	1364-0321
23)	Renewable Energy	0960-1481
24)	Sustainability Science	1862-4065
25)	Sustainable Cities and Society	2210-6707
26)	Sustainable Development	0968-0802
27)	Sustainable Materials and Technologies	2214-9937
28)	Sustainable Production and Consumption	2352-5509
29)	World Development	0305-750X