

Editorial

Winner of the Rolex Awards 2016: Congratulations to Vreni Häussermann!

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The Rolex Award for Enterprise 2016 – a kind of ‘Oscar’ for social, cultural, medical, technological or environmental innovation and performance – goes to Dr. Verena Häussermann, former ZSM researcher, collaborator, mentee and friend of the Editors.

Her remarkable series of winning awards began in 2005, when Dr. Verena Häussermann was honoured with the ‘6th R. J. H. Hintelmann-Wissenschaftspreis für Zoologische Systematik’ at the Zoologische Staatssammlung München (ZSM). More than a decade before, we first met as students in my Chilean flat. We planned to explore the diversity and taxonomy of Southeastern Pacific marine invertebrates; of course, this enterprise was not always easy and so we share dozens of more or less funny anecdotes and adventures. What I was doing with sea slugs – collecting, describing, revising taxa unnoticed by the locals all along the very long Chilean coast – Vreni and her mate Günter Försterra wanted to do with sea anemones, corals and other cnidarians. And they did extremely successfully since!

So, in my Laudatio, I wholeheartedly praised Vreni as the ‘most idealistic, most enthusiastic, and most competent young scientist I know’. For their visions, ambitions and hard and successful work Vreni and Günter became the Directors of the Huinay Research Field Station in Chilean Patagonia. Some years and several ‘Huinay Fiordos Expeditions’ into the unexplored Chilean underwater world later, they edited the book ‘Marine benthic fauna of Chilean Patagonia’ (Häussermann & Försterra 2009). This is what we call ‘the bible of the Patagonian seas’, a 1000 pages book on underwater animal life. With detailed, informative and up-to-date texts written by experts on the respective taxa and innumerable beautiful underwater photographs this monumental task now is the basis for any scientific or conservationists’ work on southern South American sea life. This effort was crowned by the highly prestigious Pew Fellowship in Marine Conservation in 2011.

Yet recently, in November 2016, during a ceremony in The Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles, known as home to the Oscars, Vreni Häussermann was awarded for what we may call the ‘Oscar’ for people making the world a better place. Selected from 2322 applicants from 144 nations, she received the Rolex Award for Enterprise

2016 from a highly distinguished Jury that included, among others, a Nobel Prize winner, an astronaut, and an Olympic Champion. Special Guest was James Cameron, who is famous not only for his movies (e.g. ‘Avatar’), but also for protecting the environment and exploring the deepest parts of the deep sea.

I’m deeply touched and amazed by this wonderful and brilliant success for several reasons: First, Vreni still is the most enthusiastic, most dedicated and most idealistic scientist I know. In addition, she is adventurous, authentic, brave, clever, curious, determined, energetic, family woman, funny, a keen diver, extremely tenacious and thus a master of making impossible missions possible. For many years now she did excellent research under usually all but excellent conditions. Together with Günter (‘Fossi’), and quite a couple of other excited and unstoppable researchers, students and helpers, she managed to survey a huge, cold, rainy and stormy but also almost pristine, fascinating and beautiful white spot of our blue planet.

Second, she did it for pure and honest motives, and against all odds. Driven by what we always called ‘Spaßforschung’ – ‘fun research’ – which does not mean that research is always fun, or that we do research just for fun. It means researching novelties for curiosity, for passion, if not love. George Mallory wanted to climb Mount Everest ‘because it’s there’. The same intrinsic motivation drives people like Vreni to spend own money and suffer hardships from weather, ice-cold waters, endless trips to remote places, chronic lack of funding, difficult organization of equipment or just to get some food, hostile bureaucracy, overgrowing paperwork and administration, invidious or simply less productive or inspired colleagues, and also from general ignorance for her big endeavour: explore interesting regions, undescribed animals, even finding unknown new habitats; publish as much new knowledge as possible; and protect what is in danger to be polluted or destroyed. As a ‘field-biologist’, fun research is more than doing basic research; it means investigating what appears novel, puzzling and interesting, regardless of payment or direct rewards, but for own curiosity and having that special unspoken long-term mission of improving their research discipline, the life of others and ultimately the world, which is intrinsic to great explor-

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ers, researchers and innovators. Working for the sake of Science and other researchers to build upon such discoveries in Vreni's case also meant to raise her voice outside Science and engage herself in environmental politics and public relations to powerfully protecting life in the fjords against threats from global change, fish-farming and illegal hunting.

Third, such prime honours to Vreni and her work are highly important for a whole scientific discipline. Systematics, especially taxonomy, the science of discovering, naming and classifying organisms within an evolutionary context, was long ignored by the public and disregarded as a perhaps necessary evil at most by other life scientists and funding agencies. Looking at dusty samples through old microscopes too much resembled what Carl von Linné had done some hundred years ago. Providing names for species collected by others, collecting in nice remote places, describing a new species from time to time, and nastily changing generic names in the light of a new phylogenetic hypothesis were not seen as real and fundable Science. This stereotype started changing with global change and using molecular techniques in systematics. However, grants and funding still rarely reach young biosystematists who really go to the field, collect organisms and then do taxonomic things. In the West, museums are the refuges of taxonomists, not universities anymore. Who knows a university hiring a taxonomist as a Chair? Well, Harvard and a few others do, but in general, money and prestige avoided taxonomy as certainly as there should be an own Nobel Prize for Biology, not just for Medicine and Chemistry. Linné, Darwin, Willi Hennig and many others would merit Nobel Prizes in Biology for their discoveries, but also museum taxonomists, for still being there and providing fundamental 'descriptive' work and expertise that is so important in times of biodiversity loss. Some say we are testimonies of the 6th global catastrophic mass extinction, with extinction rates already exceeding the rates of new species description, with still millions of species to be discovered. We may be running out of time and remaining taxonomists (Wägele et al. 2010) do what they can, but are rarely noticed or rewarded. So, the Rolex Award for Vreni Häussermann and her basically taxonomic but also ecological and conservational work is extremely timely and desirable. This best possible recognition of the importance and merit of field biology hopefully encour-

ages others to reconsider their opinion on taxonomy as one of the oldest but also most modern and needed disciplines of Sciences. Breeding some brilliant field-biologists, the most enthusiastic I know.

Some examples of the survey and taxonomic work of Vreni Häussermann, her ZSM collaborators and her international colleagues are also included in this Spixiana volume: Ceseña et al. (2016) give a faunistic analysis of the Decapoda recorded during ten years of 'Huinay-Fiordos' expeditions to Chilean Patagonia. Reyes et al. (2016) report the rediscovery of a lost fish species in Chile, the 'New Zealand Trumpeter'. Häussermann et al. (2016) present an additional gorgonian species for Chilean waters.

Dear Vreni, should you read these lines, be sure that we are all happy with you and the perhaps greatest possible success a field-biologist can have! We are proud to know you and participate with your research and activities. And, as taxonomists, we are also deeply satisfied that your type of biological research 'sensu stricto', meaningful fun research that we all love, is considered important in a worldwide competition with hundreds of great people from any fields of doing something good for mankind or nature. May this be the beginning of even greater successes exploring and protecting the seas.

Congrats again, Cheers, Michi

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