

Two international Postdocs at the IUNR

Interview with Iwona Dembicz and Jinghui Zhang

PhD students and Postdocs are generally rather rare at the IUNR compared to full universities where these two groups account for a big fraction of the staff. In the academic year 2019/20 two Postdocs have joined the Vegetation Ecology Research Group, Dr. Iwona Dembicz from Poland for 9 ½ months and Dr. Jinghui Zhang from China for a whole year. We have interviewed them to shed a light on why they specifically selected the IUNR for their research stay and how they experienced the institute, the region and Switzerland in general.



Could you briefly explain for nonprofessionals what your postdoc project is about?

Iwona: The focus in my postdoc project was to explore how the environmental factors like climate, soil and management influence species richness patterns of plants and lichens.

Jinghui: My postdoc project is very similar to Iwonas project.

What prompted you to select the IUNR/ Switzerland as hosting institution/ country of your research stay? How did the contact to the IUNR/ the Vegetation Ecology Group emerge?

Iwona: In my case it was the former cooperation with Jürgen. It was for me a very nice option to come to Switzerland. I haven't been to Switzerland before and nor-

Name

Iwona Dembicz

Age

33 years

PhD (2019)

Kurgans – refuges of steppe flora – the problem of metapopulation persistence in the anthropogenically transformed landscape (University of Warsaw)

Main research interests

- **Biodiversity**
- **Grassland ecology (mainly semi-natural grasslands of Central Europe and Eurasian steppes)**
- **Island biogeography**
- **Species-area relationships**
- **Determination of critical grass taxa (e.g. *Festuca spp.*)**
- **Orthoptera**

Home institute

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tation and I heard that Jürgen is very outstanding in that area.

How is your research stay financed? Was it hard to gain the scholarship?

Iwona: I've got a swiss government extern scholarship for foreign researchers. With this scholarship you can stay maximum one year, but I applied for nine months. I heard it's hard and really competitive. I cannot say exactly how many percent of applicants got the scholarship but I think it's just a couple of percent.

Jinghui: I got a scholarship from my country. In addition, I get 2100 Swiss Francs every month and for me it's enough.

Is it normal in China that the postdocs get a scholarship from the government to go abroad?

Jinghui: Yes. The government has many kinds of projects to provide the students to study abroad.

Certainly, you've noticed things – small or big – in your daily lives that differ from what you are used to in your home countries. Can you give examples?

Jinghui: Yes, It's very different. First, I think Switzerland is really a beautiful country. My hometown in China is surrounded by grassland and it's very flat. The climate is very dry. Therefore, I cannot see so many plant species like here in Switzerland. Second, in China, there are many people everywhere but here in Switzerland there are not so many.

Iwona: I must say that it was not unexpected for me. So the differences that I

mally travelling there for people from Poland is quite expensive.

Jinghui: When I was in China I heard that Switzerland is a beautiful country. Another reason is that my study area is about vege-

found where rather anticipated. Of course, like Jinghui already said, I find the landscape in Switzerland very beautiful and it's very different to where I live in Poland. Also in a flat area. I found the inhabitant areas are more tidy. I think the landscape planning is better here than in Poland. Especially in the surrounding of Warsaw there is a big problem of urban sprawl.

What differences did you recognise in the way how research and teaching is organised at IUNR versus your institution?

Jinghui: The research is quite similar, because we also have a lot of fieldwork. In China the teaching is more frontal. The teachers hold the lectures and the students listen, there is not so much communication.

Iwona: I think there is very high pressure at our University. We have to publish many international papers and they shall have a very high impact factor. I think somehow research and publications are very important things at our University, but of course, teaching is also very important.

So the research is more competitive in Warsaw? Or the heads of the institutes pay more attention to research?

Iwona: Yes, for example, there is some need to have at least one or two good publications per year to keep the job.

You both had also some contact with students at ZHAW? When you compare them to the students at your universities do you see differences?

Name

Jinghui Zhang

Age

32 years

PhD (2016)

Effect of grassland use on ecosystem structure and function of temperate steppe in Inner Mongolia (Beijing Normal University)

Main research interests

- **Stability mechanism of ecological communities**
- **The roles that plant functional traits play in indicating human impact on ecosystem**
- **Plant taxonomy**

Home institute

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Iwona: I think that students at ZHAW are more independent, maybe more focussed and they work more effectively.

Jinghui: Yes, I had some contacts during the Master Summer School. I found that the students at ZHAW are very active. They often think themselves.

Would you do it again?

Iwona: Yes, if I have the occasion, then I



would be happy to come to Switzerland again.

Jinghui: I would select Switzerland again and I think it was a wonderful experience for me here.

The full interview is available on the website of the Research Group at: **www.zhaw.ch/iunr/vegetation**

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