

Biodiversity, science, and cultural exchange

Interview with students of the Summer School Biodiversity Monitoring 2023

At the annual Summer School organized by the IUNR, the University of Warsaw (Poland) and the Kherson State University (Ukraine), an international group of students can explore advanced methods for surveying and monitoring biodiversity, alternating between two permanent study sites in Switzerland and Poland. In 2023, the Summer School returned to Parc Ela in Grisons, where a motivated group of 18 Swiss, Polish, and Ukrainian students surveyed the biodiversity of vascular plants, small mammals, and orthopterans in an unspoiled alpine landscape in the Albula valley. Here, four of them talk about their experiences and scientific aspirations.

Olha Chusova: Could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Kateryna Lavrinenko: I'm a PhD student of the Kholodny Institute of Botany in Ukraine. My first love was birds, but now I am a vegetation scientist. My PhD project deals with the natural vegetation and biotopes of the Synyukha river basin.

Alicja Mińczuk: I'm from Poland, and I'm studying at Warsaw University. I'm studying environmental protection, but my specialization is hydrology. I'm also very interested in the biological aspect because my future goal is to help restore degraded ecosystems like wetlands.

Maurus Meier: I'm from Bern, Switzerland. I'm in the second year of my master at the ZHAW. I'm in the Ecohydrology Group, and I'm doing my master thesis on fish migration in Swiss rivers.

Hanna Danko: I'm a PhD student at Uppsala University, Sweden, but I'm from Ukraine. I'm interested in sand vegetation

and different ecological processes in sand-plant communities. It's a pleasure to be here and meet new people!

O.C.: Did you have some experience like this Summer School before?

K.L.: It's my first trip abroad, and my first time communicating with English-speaking people. So, it was a bit complicated. But in Ukraine, I was a participant in an ornithology course. It was a quite similar process – identifying birds by song and visually. Also, my current project involves long field expeditions. But it is my first experience in such a format.

A.M.: At my university, there are many countryside trips where we go and study different topics. I've actually been on three trips, but never outside Poland, so this is a very new experience to study and learn in an international group – and to learn from them.

M.M.: Yes, I had a few expeditions during my Geography bachelor – but always only for one day. So, for me, it is the first time

having such a long period with the same people and doing research.

H.D.: I had a long period in the field, and I also attended many geobotanical courses in Ukraine. But this experience is amazing because all trips and expeditions are so nicely organized. Every person was very open and helpful. Oh my gosh, it's so nice to be here.

O.C.: Did you have some expectations for this Summer School?

A.M.: Not really. I kind of came with an open mind; I was open to whatever happens here... my expectations, I guess, were to experience international study and research projects, and to learn as much as I can!

O.C.: Did you have any international experience working with people from different countries, or is it something new for you, as it was for me?

A.M.: I did my undergraduate studies in the United States, so I guess that was my international experience. I did some projects with people from different countries during my study process.

H.D.: I had one first course at Uppsala University with people from different countries. What I learned was not only something about biology, but also how you can communicate. I think that the most impor-

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Hanna Danko





tant thing we should learn, and that will help us after this [summer] school, is, how we can communicate, and how beautiful the «biodiversity» of people is! [laughs]... I think we can learn a lot from each other.

O.C.: How does it feel here, compared to previous work experience?

A.M.: My previous study was on sociology, so in this case it's very different. I never did nature projects with international people before.

M.M.: For me, it's also the first time doing something like this. It's my first time working with people from abroad, and I think it's a good experience to do that ... Also, cultural things, like eating the food they eat, I think is a good part of such a summer school.

O.C.: Maybe, during this summer school, you acquired some new skills – something that will help you in your work or research?

M.M.: For me, it's new monitoring methods. I'm also doing a kind of monitoring for my master thesis, but with underwater camer-

as. So, it was very interesting to do something like that with small mammals, because the method is more or less the same, but there are still many other factors that have to be looked at in a successful monitoring.

A.M.: Also for me, different monitoring methods will be very helpful for my future career in the restoration of ecosystems. You need to know how to monitor the ecosystem before you try to restore it.

O.C.: Maybe you could talk about what you really liked or enjoyed, and some unexpected experiences from this summer school?

K.L.: I got a lot of inspiration, because I have an experience in field work, but I am not so skilled in statistical analyses, and I saw how skilled the foreign students are. Now I really want to become better – not only for myself, but also to teach my future students.

H.D.: It's an amazing experience, doing this monitoring – and seeing how people in Switzerland care about nature! And how

many reports, how much knowledge you can gain from this summer school; it's incredible.

O.C.: I have some additional questions for those from Ukraine ... Katy, this is your first time abroad since the full-scale invasion; what are you feeling?

K.L.: I have a very strong desire – a very strong hope – that the war in Ukraine will finish. Not if, but when. That the progress in science and the free mind of our people will go back to normal. Progress is impossible without freedom. I think that we should fight for this.

H.D.: I'm also very thankful for all people who support Ukraine and Ukrainian scientists. We try to do what we can, to fight on our side. We really hope that we will win the war, and people will be happy.

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