

Pressemitteilung

Leibniz-Institut für Gewässerökologie und Binnenfischerei (IGB)

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IGB researcher Thomas Mehner set to become new president of the International Society of Limnology

Thomas Mehner, limnologist and fish ecologist at the Leibniz-Institute of Freshwater Ecology and Inland Fisheries (IGB) in Berlin, has been elected the new President of the International Society of Limnology (SIL). The Societas Internationalis Limnologiae Theoreticae et Applicatae – as the society was originally called – is an international specialist society whose members are devoted to limnology and the management of freshwaters such as lakes, rivers and wetlands. In an interview he is sharing his ideas for a redefinition of the SIL.

Dr. Mehner, congratulations on your new position! Your time as Interim Deputy Director of IGB is coming to a close. In spring 2019, you will take office as the 13th President of the International Society of Limnology. Are you looking forward to assuming this new responsibility?

Thomas Mehner: By all means! After all, I would like to see a renewal of the International Society of Limnology – at least in part. I hope my new position will make it slightly easier for me to bring about such a redefinition. For a long time, SIL, which was established in an analogue world, was one of the most important platforms for scientific exchange in the field of limnology. And yet we entered the digital age some time ago, and the changes associated with this transition concerning the tasks of SIL must be taken into greater consideration in the future. My last two years of experience as a member of the Directorate have taught me that there are usually many opinions that need to be accepted and integrated – but it goes without saying that I prefer ideas to mere opinions. That is, I already have the first few ideas about how to reposition SIL, but ultimately the members of SIL must engage in dialogue to find out where we are going. In any case, we should find the courage to at least consider making fundamental changes.

The International Society of Limnology was launched in 1922 by German ecologist August Thienemann, who is considered to be the father of limnology. Does SIL have a special significance for limnologists in the German-speaking world?

SIL is the oldest specialist society of limnology, and limnology itself evolved as a discipline in Germany. There is therefore no denying that German limnologists feel a sense of pride and have a penchant for tradition. Nonetheless, I am very pleased that the international arena soon dedicated itself to freshwaters as ecosystems. And that we are able to exchange ideas and learn from each another across German, European and international borders, thanks in part to SIL.

Limnologiae Theoreticae et Applicatae: What inspires you more, Mr. Mehner, theoretical or applied limnology?

The field of limnology is inherently of a quite interdisciplinary nature: limnologists come from the fields of biology, chemistry, physics and mathematics. This may well be the reason for our desire to gain a holistic understanding of limnological systems. Besides this, however, we must also regularly ask ourselves: are we doing research that is also relevant? It is essential to address basic research questions, but no less important to find answers to real-life

environmental problems that are relevant to society.

That sounds sensible, and gives us an idea of the thoughts you have for a reorientation. SIL will celebrate 100 years in existence in 2022. Do you prefer to look back or to look ahead?

I think it's a shame that the importance of specialist societies has drastically declined. But that, of course, is the very thing that drives me: I want SIL to become more visible again. We share the same problems as many other member organisations: our members are getting older, the number of members has fallen, and the original advantages of specialist societies and congresses – the ability to network, to exchange results and to gain access to (unpublished) articles and data – have more or less become a thing of the past, due to the internet. And yet this now gives us the opportunity to use the structures that have evolved over the past 100 years to address new tasks. We need to set ourselves new goals that we can work towards together – after all, there is plenty of work to do.

So you want to change the role of specialist societies as enablers of pure academic networking and exchange to that of organisations that take a stance on specific issues?

Yes. I would like us to work more programmatically, focusing on priorities and becoming more practice-oriented again. Up until the 1990s, for example, eutrophication represented a key research area. Although the problem has not been completely resolved, limnological research means that we now all know what the causes are and how this process can be avoided or reversed. What comparable problems are we facing today? I could envisage us involving our members in developing and emerging countries much more closely and hearing about issues that are not on our radar, but which limnologists throughout the world could work towards resolving. Maybe SIL could serve as a mouthpiece for these countries and their freshwater issues.

Do you get the impression that young scientists are more likely to be inspired by such specific goals?

Absolutely! Ideally, SIL will soon become an established port of call again for young limnologists, with them being firmly anchored in SIL. Many young researchers are united in their desire to solve problems; they want to make a difference and not merely turn their hobby into a career. Research always has the potential to solve specific problems, but of course in order to do that, we need to take a closer look at the problems. SIL Congresses are an ideal platform for this – it is the place where several hundred limnologists and researchers from related disciplines come together for six days to exchange information and ideas.

The next-but-one SIL Congress, which will also be its anniversary celebration, will be hosted by Berlin in 2022. What role will you play in this?

SIL Congresses are organised by the respective national representatives and their institutions. In 2022, it will therefore be organised by limnologists from Germany. Since IGB is located in Berlin and I will (hopefully) still be President, IGB will play a leading role in this Congress. But I would also welcome lively exchange and cooperation in the preparatory work with all limnologists from Germany. In any event, I hope that we will have initiated a number of changes by 2022. And that we can use the Congress to join forces and help the International Society of Limnology regain the international relevance that it enjoyed in the past and that it deserves.

The interview was conducted by Katharina Bunk.

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About the Leibniz-Institute of Freshwater Ecology and Inland Fisheries (IGB):

Work at IGB combines basic research with preventive research as a basis for the sustainable management of freshwaters. In the process, IGB explores the structure and function of aquatic ecosystems under near-natural conditions and under the effect of multiple stressors. Its key research activities include the long-term development of lakes, rivers and wetlands under rapidly changing global, regional and local environmental conditions, the development of coupled ecological and socio-economic models, the renaturation of ecosystems, and the biodiversity of aquatic habitats. Work is conducted in close cooperation with universities and research institutions from the Berlin-Brandenburg region as well as worldwide. IGB is a member of the Forschungsverbund Berlin e.V., an association of eight research institutes of natural sciences, life sciences and environmental sciences in Berlin. The institutes are members of the Leibniz Association. <http://www.igb-berlin.de/en>

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Thomas Mehner is Lead of the Food Web Ecology and Fish Communities Research Group, and currently also Deputy Director of IGB.

Photo: David Ausserhofer

