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# I wish that we keep the diversity of grasslands

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## Interview

# I wish that we keep the diversity of grasslands

During the stay of several EDGG members in Bayreuth in September 2015, an interview was recorded with a founder of this organisation, Jürgen Dengler. Questions were asked by Monika Janišová (MJ), Anna Kuzemko (AK) and Kiril Vassilev (KV).



**Jürgen Dengler, EDGG Filed Workshop in Navarra, June 2014. Photo: Monika Janišová**

MJ: Jürgen, you are one of the first three members of the EDGG, a very important person during the development of this organisation, a very well-known person, at least within the EDGG membership. Could you tell us something about the idea to establish the EDGG and your former vision of its role?

JD: Actually, we have to go one step further back, and that is the German *Arbeitsgruppe Trockenrasen*. It was where everything started, I think in the year 2004. Then, Ute Jandt and I came up with the idea that we want to classify the dry grasslands of Germany and we set up a working group. And then we had our first conference in Lüneburg in 2004, attended by rather small group of dry grassland specialists from Germany, with some nice presentations, and we already started already to make special features, one in *Tuexenia* and one in the *Kieler Notizen zur Pflanzenkunde*. After the experience with this meeting, we thought that we should continue with annual meetings, and this idea developed very nicely, while the idea to classify German dry grasslands, you know, has still not been accomplished. Just few days ago I've got an e-mail from Professor Dierschke showing his disappointment that still, after so many years and despite the Eurasian Dry Grassland Group so flourishing, we did not manage in Germany to produce anything about country-wide classification of dry grasslands. It was supposed to be published in the

*Synopsis der Pflanzengesellschaften von Deutschland*. So, that was the original idea. And then we had a couple of conferences in Germany of the *Arbeitsgruppe Trockenrasen*, which was a basically a national working group, initially not connected to the IAVS, but already in the second year we had attendees from abroad. And every year they became more. I also initiated the database of the Nordic and Baltic dry grasslands, because I had couple of Diplom students working on dry grasslands on Öland in Sweden and on Saaremaa in Estonia. I was also quite interested in that topic, and there were hardly any data available, so we established this database. And then we decided that the conference in Kiel 2008 should be the joint conference of these two working groups and be held in English. During this conference we realised that probably in the long run we have too few people in Germany to keep such group running and on the other hand there are so many other interested people in different places in Europe, so we decided to put the working group on a "higher level", the European level at that time. We were lucky that during this conference there was a broad majority of participants who supported this idea to make it an international organisation. Solvita Rusina was there and we had some e-mail exchange with you and could gain you during the conference to be the third steering committee member together with us. That was the start. The next conference was still in Germany, in Halle, but the subsequent one was the first outside Germany.

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MJ: The primary aim of classification of dry grassland vegetation is not the only aim of the recent EDGG, there are many other aims the organisation fulfils. What is in your opinion the most important aim of the recent EDGG?

JD: Well, from my point of view, that is clearly bringing people from different countries together, to exchange ideas and also communicate about methods, and to help people in different countries who might be not advanced in the methodologies.

MJ: And what is the most important achievement of the EDGG during its 8-year history?

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JD: Well, we don't have really many joint publications yet, but I think, bring together more than one thousand people to a such active scientific life is a great achievement that was not planned in this way originally but I am very happy about it. I think we are the biggest and more or less most active working group in IAVS and very active beyond IAVS as we also have good zoologists.

MJ: Yes, we have more than one thousand members but very small proportion of these members are really active. Can you try to estimate which fraction of these people really take part in these activities?

JD: We had conferences with about 150 participants, that would already be 15% of the membership.

MJ: So maybe about one quarter of members are active. Is it enough in such a huge organisation?

JD: Yes, it is not an idea of any scientific organisation, at least in my understanding, that all members have to be very active. It is also great if some people only use our media. I think very many of our members are just happy to receive every three months our splendid Bulletin. That is already an achievement if people really like it and also take information from that, and see what is published by other members on the topic. I think it is not important that everyone really attends our conference, we cannot expect that, because there are so many conferences by so many organisations every year and also many people particularly from Eastern and now also from Southern Europe have problems with getting funding to attend conferences. We also cannot organize conferences that are much bigger than 150 people.

MJ: Supposing the EDGG develops successfully, what would you like to see in the future, what is the role of the future EDGG and what could be achieved together?

JD: I would really like to keep it a vivid international scientific organisation, I would appreciate if we manage to get more zoologists involved, or specialists for other groups than vascular plants, and also to get those researchers from the natural steppe areas in central Asia more involved in our group. The other point is that we should now try to get also some really important scientific outputs like broad-scale classification schemes. And for the future I could also imagine, and I have this in my mind since years, that we should publish jointly a book about grasslands or dry grasslands of the Palearctic with all the information brought together in one place.

MJ: I see that you mainly see the future aims in the scientific outputs, but do you also see that some applied scientific knowledge



**During IAVS Congress in Australia, July 2014. Photo: Monika Janisova**

would be important?

JD: I think we also made some important steps in this direction. The *Smolenice Grassland Declaration* was an early achievement, and now that we are much bigger and much more influential group, I think, we could work more on the policy level, e.g. together with the European Federation for Nature Conservation and Pastoralism, whose member we are. I am not a good person for that, but I find it important and I could imagine that e.g. a book on the best practices in management and conservation of different grassland types would be valuable. We should work in all these directions.

AK: Jürgen, how many countries have you visited in your life?

JD: Do you mean as an EDGG representative or in general?

AK: In general.

JD: Well, I can tell you that in Europe there are only very few countries where I have not been: Iceland, Albania, Kazakhstan, the Caucasus countries and then some very tiny countries, like Andorra and Monaco, San Marino, Malta and Luxembourg. Outside Europe I visited Turkey, three countries in Africa, three countries in South America, Australia and South Korea.

AK: Which country is the most attractive for your next visit, for example as a destination of the next field workshop?

JD: Caucasus, Anatolia, and, yes, I really would like to study the steppe grasslands of the inner alpine dry valleys, resampling what Braun-Blanquet documented in his famous book 1961 because these grasslands are so nice, so diverse and so little understood.

MJ: Could you tell us three properties which an ideal participant of the EDGG field workshop should have?

JD: Well, the most important is good mood, so you should not get into bad mood if the weather is not so good, if we return to the accommodation only at ten o'clock in the night, or such things. Then, he really should be willing to actively contribute, help with the sampling, share the aim of the field workshop, and not just using the

field workshops as a way of doing tourism somewhere. To have some knowledge is good, on plants and on methodology, and he should be willing to share it with the others.

AK: Which of the seven EDGG expeditions you took part in was the most interesting and which was the most difficult for you?

JD: I found the one in Khakassia, South Siberia, most interesting for myself because that was the first time we really have been in natural steppes. By contrast, in Ukraine we were at the margin of natural steppes or in the forest steppe zone, and I did not have the impression that it is so much different from Central Europe. But in Khakassia that was really something else. It was clear, except on some north-facing slopes, that steppe is the natural vegetation, it was for me quite impressive and it widened my view as a grassland researcher. The other particularly fascinating expedition was the first one in Transylvania, where I started this all. It was not an EDGG event at that time, but just a private cooperation between me, Eszter Ruprecht and Anna Szabó from Cluj, because Eszter had been at the conference in Kiel and she presented so fantastic photographs and showed us *Stipa pulcherrima* growing to the horizon and told us that this was



During EDGG Expedition in Ukraine, July 2010.  
Photo: Olena Javorska

a degraded habitat. This was certainly a place I would like to see. And then we were there and the very first plot we made was this world-record plot. It is really ridiculous, the very first day and we spent, I think, six hours on it. And this landscape in Transylvania with the huge semi-natural grasslands, the old cultural landscapes, it was also very nice. But it also was a kind of stressful field workshop in Transylvania and similarly in Ukraine because the weather was really, really hot there and we worked very long. The temperature was about 35 °C and we worked on south-facing slopes. Even if you make two hours of siesta in the shadow during the hottest part of the day, it still is demanding.

AK: Yes, I remember one day in Ukraine, it was about 40 °C.

JD: On the other hand it was such a fantastic landscape in Transylvania, not only the dry grasslands. And it flowered so nicely. It was rather late in the year but the previous months were rather wet so many plants were flowering, it was nice. And then, the third workshop was the one in Sicily. I have very good memories to that because we had so nice food. Of course, in general, Italian food is nice but, for example, several times we had eaten in “agroturismos” where they had basic traditional food often made with local vegetables, sometimes even from wild plants, and of course combined with nice wine. Basically all the workshops were nice, we were a good team, I could not differentiate between them. It always was a great pleasure to be together with these people, and many of them became “addicted” to these workshops and come again and again.

MJ: Both you and Zygmunt during his interview talked so nicely about field workshops. Are you not afraid that at some moment you will have problem with too many applicants?

JD: I don't think so. This is a very specific type of people who are joining the field workshops. So not every of our members would like to do that, and many are not able to spend so much time for such a sampling. It is a lot of fun, but it is also hard work. Many people do not like that, so I am not afraid. We rather had some problems to get enough people for the workshops.

MJ: Is it possible that if there are too many applicants, EDGG will organize several workshops per year?

JD: Theoretically it is possible but I don't think that we really have the capacities for that right now. And I also do not see that we will have so many applicants.

MJ: It is going to be changed after this Bulletin is published

☺ Now, I have another question. You work at the university for a very long time, and I wonder if you realized that there is some change in the attitude of young people to natural sciences, whether there is enough interest among young people for natural sciences and whether the young people have the same level of knowledge as, let's say, 20 years ago.

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“... Nowadays there are still few students really interested in outdoor biology or whole-organism biology, but the majority of those studying Biology want to have a job in the lab, everything very clean everything, no need to go out, to get dirty and things like that. In many big universities ecology or the whole-organism biology have been abandoned or replaced by only molecular biology.”

JD: I think there are really big changes. In the generation when I was student, ecology was still a subject at most German universities: nearly every university had several chairs of ecology: plant ecology, animal ecology, etc. Many, many students of my age focussed on ecology and field biology, and they were good field zoologists, field botanists, ... Nowadays there are still few students really interested in outdoor biology or whole-organism biology, but the majority of those studying Biology want to have a job in the lab, everything very clean everything, no need to go out, to get dirty and things like that. In many big universities ecology or the whole-organism biology have been abandoned or replaced by only molecular biology. And even here in Bayreuth where we are one of the strongest universities in Germany in terms of ecology, I would say at least two thirds of the Biology Bachelor students are not at all interested to do biology outside

the lab, they are really focussed at going in the lab and working with cells or genes.

MJ: Maybe you could make a direct comparison because you studied in Bayreuth and now you are teaching at the same university in Bayreuth. Was the percentage of students studying natural sciences interested in field biology higher in the past?

JD: Yes, it was much higher. On the other hand, students nowadays have many capabilities and interests that are also important and that we did not have at my time. Nowadays students are able to do very good presentations often much better than professors, they are able to do very fancy statistics, which we were not at all at my time, and, I would say, they are also much more international now. Already at the student age they are participating in exchanges, Erasmus programs, summer schools and so on, something that was very rare before. I never did it, I started all my international activities basically after the PhD.

MJ: And if you compare the offer from the side of the teachers? Do they offer now more than before? I mean more subjects, more field courses, etc.

JD: No, I think the offer is much smaller, and even if there are ecologists or systematians at the universities, they typically have much narrower knowledge than in the past.

MJ: When you decided to become botanist or how do you call yourself, botanist or plant ecologist?

JD: I would call myself an ecologist. Now, I am working more with plants than with animals but I would not say that I am restricted to

plants. If you look here in the library, there are about as many books on animals as on plants. When I was at school I was more interested in animals, mainly amphibians and reptiles. It was just at the age of 16, when I became involved in the program of mapping the flora of my home town very intensively.

MJ: Did you have somebody who inspired you to become ecologist, who trained you in distinguishing plants and animals and showed you how to do the science?

JD: The first who inspired me was actually not my biology teacher but my Latin teacher at the Gymnasium, who was also biology teacher but not mine. And he was one of the old school, he was about sixty but he had really good knowledge and at the same time he was the President of the local branch of a conservation NGO. When he realized that I am very interested in this topic, he connected me somehow to this NGO (at that time it was called *Deutscher Bund für Vogelschutz*). I've got involved in the youth branch of this NGO and I organized a mapping project for amphibians and reptiles with this organisation, and so on.

MJ: Which scientist was the most important in your professional life?

JD: This is rather clear: Klaus Dierßen, the supervisor of my Diplom thesis and also of my PhD thesis, Professor of Geobotany at the University of Kiel at that time, now retired. He has such an incredible



**During EDGG Meeting in Ukraine, June 2011. Photo: Galina Sivko**



*Pulsatilla vulgaris*—painting by Jürgen Dengler

knowledge of at least the flora of Europe, including all the cryptogams, such a good knowledge in the field, such understanding how ecosystems and plant communities work, so I really learned many, many things from him. I also learned from him to work very thoroughly in the field and not to overlook things. He always encouraged me to continue and he was open to my ideas and he never forced his ideas to other people, he gave his opinion and directed me somehow but gave me very broad freedom. I was much inspired by him and without him I would probably not be the scientist I am now.

KV: What are you planning to do in science during the next 15 years?

JD: That's a very difficult question. You know that the situation for non-professors in Germany is really hard: continuous search for new positions with a short term contract, very unpredictable. But I am optimistic!

MJ: How many books you have at home?

JD: We can just make an estimate: maybe 3,000, would be a guess.

MJ: And how many pots with flowers?

JD: Few ☺. I am not a good gardener, not at all, because I am always traveling, so I gave up to have animals as in the past, and the plants have a horrible life with me, but somehow they survive.

MJ: So, much less than books?

JD: Yes, maybe thirty pots or not even that, no, twenty.

MJ: What kind of music do you like?

JD: I very much like jazz, more the modern jazz, but, very different styles, I am also member of the Jazz club in Bayreuth, and there was also one in Lüneburg, and they have concerts every two or three weeks in the winter term, and for members they are free, so I am really often attending them. And the other music I am listening much is various types of classical music. Also all the different epochs, from the barock to rather modern classics.

MJ: Do you play also some instrument?

JD: I played in the past trumpet, but I was never good, so I gave up. I think I am not talented in that.

MJ: In your flat you have a lot of paintings, which you painted by yourself. Did you have some special period in your life when you were devoted to painting, or you do it permanently?

JD: No, recently, I cannot find any time for that. In the past, I did it frequently, nowadays the only art I am doing in a wider sense is photography. That is not so time-consuming.

MJ: Yes, you always make a lot of pictures during our events, maybe more than all other people. You are always busy with one camera, two cameras and several lenses on the back and I suppose you bring hundreds or thousands of pictures from each event. And you make some selections for the presentations, as you just showed us. Do you plan to publish some of these nice photos in the future, maybe in the planned book of the EDGG?

JD: Yes, of course, it would be nice. Many of them are published in the EDGG Bulletin anyway. I am really happy that I can contribute something to nice appearance of our Bulletin. For example, in *Tuexenia* and other publications that allow colour photos I am always happy to contribute some photos, because they are very helpful to illustrate vegetation types, instead of only having vegetation tables.

MJ: Can you advise our readers how to store huge files and numbers of photos? And another question is whether you often come back to the older photos or you just store and store and never come back to them?

JD: That is now much easier in digital time. In the past, I had also a collection of maybe 30,000 slides, and in the beginning when I started to do that I started also to do a database to be able to find something, but I never had time to manage this database for slides and when I searched for something it was always very time-consuming.

MJ: Do you sometimes come back to these slides?

JD: Currently not; I am hoping to get them digitized. I bought a device for digitizing five or six years ago but never had time to do that, but maybe now at the institute my technical assistant can do that. We are planning to do that. Would be worthwhile because there are very important pictures from places where I have been, but also there are many more important and more interesting things than digitizing of slides ☺. Well, with the digital slides it is much easier. I do not have the time to manage them perfectly, but one has not to do everything at once. So, you can also step by step add information and I have them in a program called Lightroom, which on the one hand is a good tool to improve the quality, but also has a database function to label your photos with different key-

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words, and not give the photos the name. My photos do not have names, just numbers, but they have multiple keywords, so you can access them with combination of keywords and that's basically very nice. I also like to illustrate my own lectures with some of the good own photographs.

MJ: I like that you are able to share your photos.

JD: Yes, often people are disappointed because I am not able to share them immediately one or two days after the event, because I have to process them, but those who are patient will always get my photos and I am really open to share them. I am happy when the photos are used.

MJ: What is your favourite food?

JD: I like very much Käsespätzle, this is southern-German handmade pasta with cheese and onions and with a big salad.

MJ: Who is your favourite painter and why?

JD: I would say, Claude Monet. I like the impressionists very much, how they capture these different colours and reflections and you get the picture only from the distance. There are also very nice other impressionists.

MJ: What is your favourite housework? Which one is relaxing for you?

JD: Most of the housework I really hate. Washing dishes, washing cloths and ironing, cleaning, I do not like. But I like cooking and baking. At least something ☺.

MJ: Do you have some other message for our readers? What would you like to wish them?

JD: I wish that we keep the diversity of grasslands. And now I have question to you: Which kind of photos would you like to see?

“...I am really happy that I can contribute something to nice appearance of our Bulletin. For example, in *Tuexenia* and other publications that allow colour photos I am always happy to contribute some photos, because they are very helpful to illustrate vegetation types, instead of only having vegetation tables.”



The beauty of nature through the lens of Jürgen Dengler