
Christine Beatrice Müller

Today, on 7 March 2008 in the morning Christine Müller died from cancer in Zurich. She was 46 years old. During the past 6 years she lived with the disease while contributing an immense amount both to science and to the University of Zurich. She completed several excellent studies and laid the groundwork for many others. Christine was a superb researcher and teacher, and she inspired us all with her dedication and enthusiasm, both for life in general and for interactions between organisms in particular: small and large, slow and fast, producers and consumers, beautiful and fearsome, they were all grist to Christine's mill. She planned to investigate these interactions further in order to understand the underlying rules in projects submitted to the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF) and others. Christine's sudden death leaves a large gap among us.

Christine was born on 24 December 1961 and grew up in the region of Basel where she went to school and University. Already as a child she was often outside studying and collecting animals. In her PhD work she investigated whether or not parasites could change the behaviour of bumble bees. Later she worked in the field at Imperial College's Silwood Park, often going every day, to count aphids on plants and to find out whether they had been attacked by parasitoid insects. With this meticulous data collection she then drew interaction webs that depicted how much each species consumed every other.

From 2002 until today Christine was an SNF professor of the Faculty of Mathematics and Science at the University of Zurich. During six years she built up a very strong research group by consistently attracting the best students. Two of her four PhD students who have completed their theses obtained a distinction for their work. In our recent interviews with new candidates most of them wanted to work with Christine, be it on conservation biology projects in Mauritius to save endangered species from extinction, or on interactions between plants and animals. Her field courses in the Alps, Romania and South Africa were highlights for biology and environmental science students and she always obtained the highest grades of all of us for her teaching.

Christine just received her habilitation for her research into food-web ecology on her way to a permanent professorship. One reviewer wrote "Dr Müller and her research group were clearly providing intellectual leadership at the forefront of this field. They are probably one of the top three or four research groups in this area." Indeed, at the conclusion of an international conference, the chair singled out Christine's research area as "among the most exciting advances in the past three years" and "clearly the way of the future." Sadly, Christine will not be able to accompany her group into this future, but her inspiration and vision certainly will. All of us at the Institute of Environmental Sciences are deeply saddened by the loss of our wonderful friend, teacher and collaborator. She leaves an enormous gap; but also her enormous achievements on which we can continue to build.

Bernhard Schmid, Institute of Environmental Sciences, Zurich, 7 March 2008