Do right and fear no one

For some years now, the European Community has faced very serious financial and economic problems. In this context, there is a drive to cut back on what is seen as unnecessary expenditure. Nature conservation and scientific research on conservation biology do not figure highly in the priority lists of many policy makers and have been greatly affected by these cutbacks. More than before, publicly funded research has to provide clear evidence of its probable (economic) benefits to humans and society, or show that it can deliver straightforward answers to questions about the effectiveness of European regulations and policy measures. At the same time, scientific research programmes are also being forced to fit in with increasingly rigid time-management, and provide ever-more detailed budget estimates.

In contrast to these actual trends in how research is organised and funded, much biological investigation depends greatly on the personal interest or passion of the researchers involved. Professional biologists are sometimes – pejoratively – considered to be the most 'emotional' of scientists. Not everybody realises the surplus value that stems from biologists being highly involved in and engaged with their research topics. The dedication of research workers goes some way to explaining their willingness to undertake bizarre activities, such as analysing animal faeces, doing autopsies of half-rotten bodies, controlling live traps or making observations in the middle of the night at -20°C. If one had to pay someone who doesn't really want to do such things, prefers a nine to five job and has no empathy with the aim and the context of the investigation, the quality of the findings and results might be questionable. Moreover, only a dedicated researcher will be paying attention to possible unexpected phenomena, or be able to postulate new hypotheses while out in the field (or in the lab) performing the planned research activities. One usually needs a lot of expert knowledge to postulate the right new questions. The development of scientific knowledge rests to a great extent on the passion and involvement of those engaged in it. There is a price attached to this progress but it can't be calculated in purely monetary terms.

On top of all this, mammals are not the easiest biological subjects to study: most species lead very hidden lives. Studying them often requires lots of time and patience – again requiring the researcher's involvement, passion, and sense of precision. Bekker's description (2011) of the mammalogist's material toolkit might be extended by other non-material characteristics: passion, patience and sense of precision. By working for a long term in a specific research field it becomes possible to penetrate the inner world of the subject, and really become an expert – even at risk of being considered by outsiders as a kind of a bizarre hobbyist. One needs to question whether the existing trend towards economically man-

aged 'science-to-order' can ever generate the same deep expertise and the effect that this has as a driving force for science.

In this context, professional researchers are often very grateful for the support they receive from many dedicated volunteer workers. This relationship is often symbiotic. Amateur naturists learn much and feel a sense of value when participating in formally structured scientific surveys. The volume of work (often at unsocial hours) and expertise that volunteers contribute is very impressive and would hardly be affordable through the wage economy. One only needs to look at the wealth of articles that have appeared in Lutra that have been dependent on this volunteer labour pool to realise what a valuable resource it is. Volunteers deserve some 'pay back' for this. One way we try to do this is by ensuring that Lutra remains an open access science journal, giving volunteers the same access to publications as professional researchers.

In this volume of Lutra we present a diverse mix of papers, originating from different contexts. Hardly any of them could have been the product of ordinary nine-to-five-jobs. Wijsman's paper on the relation between the reproduction of pine martens (*Martes martes*) and food availability brings together data from different origins, much of it gathered by many passionate volunteers over several years – representing a priceless amount of work. Chanin and Gubert perform some clear tests and highlight the impact of fragmentation on common dormice (*Muscardinus avellanarius*), a species that is strictly protected by the European Habitat Directive. Kuipers et al. report their findings on the food ecology of the garden dormouse (*Eliomys quercinus*), another member of the dormouse family. In contrast to the former species and analogous to the pine marten, the garden dormouse is not protected at the European level although being of prime conservation interest in the Netherlands and Flanders. The analyses of dormouse faeces (mostly collected by volunteers) is a striking illustration of the need for lots of patience and enthusiasm. Economic managers might find it hard to believe that this is part of a real job, but from this painstaking work they have developed clear recommendations on habitat management that might help conserve this Red List species. Haigh et al.'s paper on western hedgehogs (*Erinaceus europaeus*) illustrates how science works: a continuous bringing together of carefully made observations on a species that helps to complete our knowledge of its – elementary – biology. The study by de Vooys et al. on the harbour seal (*Phoca vitulina*) population in the estuarine area in the south-western Netherlands is a long term study that provides critical information about the evolving relationship between man and nature over the centuries. Curiosity and the passion to increase our biological knowledge can often drive the development and application of new techniques. Camphuysen and Siemensma brought together a large amount of knowledge in their conservation plan for the harbour porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) in Dutch waters, here thoroughly reviewed by Smeenk.

So, mammalogists should not hesitate to continue to pursue their job or hobby: there are plenty of interesting cases to investigate and many questions still to answer. And, even in an age of crisis, we should never abandon our most powerful strengths: our passion, patience and sense of precision.

Bekker, J.P. 2011. The mammalogist's toolkit. Lutra 54 (2): 65-68.

Koen Van Den Berge