



OF LAKES, TREES, AND COLLOQUIA
ELENA ARRIERO

I am an evolutionary biologist interested in life history evolution and physiological ecology. I obtained a Ph.D. in Biology in Spain in 2004. As a postdoctoral researcher, I have worked in various institutions in the United States, France, and Germany. Currently I am an Assistant Professor at the Complutense University of Madrid in Spain. I seek to understand the consequences of parasitism and the evolution of mechanisms involved in disease resistance. During my time at Wiko, I was a member of the College for Life Sciences and my project focused on understanding how animals physiologically and evolutionarily cope with infectious diseases. – Address: Department of Zoology and Physical Anthropology, University Complutense of Madrid, José Antonio Novais 2, 28040 Madrid, Spain. E-mail: elena.arriero@bio.ucm.es

I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg with the (erroneous) idea that I would be 100 % focused on my work: isolated and able to devote myself entirely to intensive writing so as to finish up several publications that had been pending for some time and that would give a strong boost to my c.v. Certainly, the atmosphere at Wiko made me enjoy writing manuscripts as never before. I was not able to finish as many tasks as I had hoped; instead, I was happily distracted with so many amazing activities that I do not regret a single minute not devoted to “my project” while at Wiko. Whether by colloquia, symposia, a visit to the treasures of the Staatsbibliothek, a seminar at another research institute in Berlin, a glass of wine with Fellows, a good conversation over a cup of coffee, a morning run in the amazing Grunewald while outlining the structure of the next seminar I had to prepare, my time as a Fellow was greatly enriched. Wiko offers the amazing opportunity to think

beyond the confines of a particular manuscript and to broaden one's perspectives by sharing ideas and having discussions with Fellows from other disciplines. These other moments are a precious part of the fellowship experience, which is far more than just a time during which you can think about your own tiny project. I feel that the interdisciplinary environment, the personal ties with other Fellows, and the exposure to so many different exciting talks and discussions will drive my professional career in a different direction. Now, as I look back on my stay at Wiko, I am happily surprised at what I was able to achieve during that short period. I wrote one paper and drafted another one, participated in a conference and two workshops in Berlin, and designed new experiments for my research project. And, on top of that, Berlin was an unexpected surprise for me as a city. Despite my limited number of escapades to enjoy nocturnal events, such as concerts or theatrical performances, I was able to enjoy the city in many different ways, and Berlin has definitely become one of my favorite places.

When I first received the Fellow book for the year and looked at the pictures of my "Co-Fellows to be", I could not imagine what an interesting and diverse group of people I was going to have the chance to meet. Their academic achievements were, of course, apparent, but it was amazing to discover that all of them had very interesting professional and personal trajectories, stimulating hobbies, and secret projects beyond their academic interests. Even more unexpected was that I was able to meet a more extensive group of interesting people, beyond my Fellows, thanks to Wiko's great efforts to make partners and family members part of the community. These efforts set Wiko apart from other institutions; they are not only one of the characteristics that make Wiko special, but are also undoubtedly a key to its success. They make it more likely that researchers will be willing to spend a year away from home and their "normal lives" AND enrich the Wiko community and generate the possibility of interactions on many different levels.

The Tuesday colloquia series became one of my favorite activities. I began attending as a curious observer trying to understand how researchers from other disciplines developed their arguments and presented their conclusions in long statements that, in some fields, lacked what I thought were the essentials: e.g., empirical data and supporting statistics. However, I slowly realized that the further removed the discipline was from my own, the more I enjoyed it, or the more I absorbed by it, I should say. And the lunch that followed the colloquium was also very exciting because there was more time to discuss the topic in a less formal way. I learned a lot about other disciplines that I initially considered to be far away from my own field of study. It was even more incredible to discover that

our research questions even shared some commonalities, that we could have very fruitful interactions, and that, overall, we felt the same great satisfaction in learning new things and savored knowledge for its own sake. It was also extremely valuable to see how researchers in other disciplines work, what their career goals are, and the paths and obstacles involved in their pursuit. This experience broadened my own perspectives for my career goals and enriched my perception of academic life.

At Wiko, I was part of the College for Life Sciences: a lucky group of junior researchers invited to join Wiko for a shorter period during the academic year. I have to thank Giovanni Frazzetto for his efficient management of the College and for creating such a pleasant ambiance for us. Although all eight of us were never at Wiko at the same time, we did co-occur in small groups, which gave us the opportunity to share our common interests, engage in exciting discussions, and express anxiety about our careers. However, there was one trait we definitely all had in common: none of us wanted to leave Wiko when the time came. This fact is perhaps the best indicator of the remarkable nature of our experience. As I write these lines, I admit that I have been happily watching videos of talks given by Fellows (e.g., during evening colloquia and seminars). These are some of the events that I missed because I left Wiko in January. However, it was great to find out that I could still be part of some of these activities, albeit remotely.

I had hoped that my months in Berlin would help me improve my German. Certainly, I was motivated to learn and study German during my stay. However, I was so distracted by the many exciting opportunities offered at Wiko that I must sadly admit that I have failed to meet my “language” goal. Well, I failed in the sense that my German skills remain quite embarrassing, although there is no doubt that I improved my German during my stay. This progress was made thanks to Eva and her incredible patience with “bad” students like me; I always wanted to speak despite my terrible grammatical mistakes and horrible pronunciation.

After my fellowship had ended and I had resumed my teaching duties at Complutense University, I managed to return to Wiko for the workshop held by the focus group on sexual selection. It was a great pleasure to return for a few days, and it immediately felt like home, even though I was staying in one of the guest rooms and not in the fantastic apartment I had in Villa Walther during the four months of my fellowship. I was very glad to see that the Fellows had indeed become a Wiko family to which I also belonged, and the warm welcome by the staff and the other Fellows was quite moving. Feeling a bit like a distant relative visiting for Christmas, I realized that the experience at Wiko had

been very personally and professionally intense. Wiko left an indelible mark on me, and I hope I have left a bit of myself there as well. There are some Fellows with whom I am sure I will be in touch in the future, even if it is not as often as we would like. I also hope to cross paths with others in conferences or other professional venues. Unfortunately, the chances of such are low, and it will never be as pleasant an experience as the one that took place within the walls of Wiko, nor can it last as long. However, the experiences, fruitful discussions, glasses of wine, dances, and jokes we shared will always remain, and I have no doubt that my Co-Fellows will continue to influence the way that I think about many things, including my career.

I still smile when I remember my arrival at Wiko. Despite the incredibly efficient way Wiko organizes each Fellow's arrival and stay and, consequently, the precise instructions I had received, I arrived in Berlin having printed a copy of the wrong e-mail. It was only while waiting for the taxi in Tegel that I realized that the phone number and office hours of the German teacher were not going to help me much on a Sunday night on Wallotstraße. The worried face of the taxi driver as he asked me whether I was sure that I wanted to be left there, at the base of the staircase at Wallotstraße 19, made me feel embarrassed at my unfortunate display of chaotic planning and improvisation. So there I was, with my two-year-old daughter perched on top of my suitcases, asking me why the man was speaking so strangely. It took me a little while to get an Internet connection on my phone and find the right e-mail. Then, immediately, Vera arrived to give me the keys to my little piece of Grunewald paradise for the next four months.

There is something unique about Wiko's multidisciplinary environment. As academics, we are accustomed to giving talks, presenting results, writing papers, and discussing projects within the safe and narrow confines of our own disciplines. I have always admired and respected people capable of providing the "big picture" for their work. However, the boundaries of that big picture become blurred when you are presenting to a group of intellectuals that includes writers, musicians, philosophers, evolutionary biologists, sociologists, historians, psychologists, molecular biologists, philologists, and economists, among others. Indeed, it is a major challenge not to fall into the trap of oversimplifying your scientific work or presenting a very specific issue without transcending the boundaries of your small discipline. You can gain practice at this non-trivial task in a variety of ways: from the relaxed lunchtime chat to the more formal colloquium that is, in my opinion, the defining feature of the Wiko experience. You are forced to move out of the comfort zone of your tiny discipline. This intellectual expansion is, little by little,

reflected in the way you write about your work, think about scientific questions in your discipline, and view your own career and trajectory. I recall reading reports written by Fellows from past years: several Fellows mentioned that their projects took a more conceptual turn and that their topics became broader than planned after arriving at Wiko. In some cases, projects even went in entirely new directions as a consequence of discussions with other Fellows. I find such changes fascinating and feel that they can be very fruitful for someone's career. I hope my experience at Wiko was long enough or intense enough to have resonated in that same way for me, that it will permanently inform the way I understand and approach science.

I would like to conclude by thanking Wiko as an institution and by extending gratitude to all of the members of the staff for their continuous support and friendliness. It is their efficient work and dedication that creates the comfortable environment that makes the stay at Wiko incredibly pleasant and fruitful. I feel extremely lucky to have had the chance to become part of the Wiko community and have enjoyed all the extraordinary experiences that it entails.