



THE ECOLOGY OF A WIKO COMMUNITY  
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Whenever I present my research to a varied audience, I begin by explaining that it concerns communities of biological species. In social sciences and humanities, community ecology commonly refers to human societies, which are beyond my own sphere of investigation.

I opened my Colloquium at the Wissenschaftskolleg with this clarification, as usual, and then proceeded into my project and the questions with which it was concerned.

In retrospect, however, the conceptual exploration of biological community ecology I proposed to develop became intermingled with the experience of the Wiko community – itself a very special assemblage of Fellows, partners, directors, staff, visitors and more. This community, with its variegated tapestry of interactions, has an ecology of its own, as wonderful and challenging as those I have been trying to explore over several decades. In this short account, I want to impart something of my attempt to understand ecological communities as an investigating observer, but also of the experience as a participating subject in the Wiko community.<sup>1</sup>

### Making Sense of Community Ecology

In my proposal, I set out to review the conceptual development of Community Ecology in the last half-century, as well as its current status, given the rearrangement of subdivisions of ecology and neighbouring fields, as well as increasing external demands for their application. This was submitted as a solo endeavour, although I contemplated potential collaborations.

I seized the opportunity to present this project early on in the internal colloquium. The challenge of expounding a fairly specialized subject to an audience of diverse backgrounds was pleasurable but demanding – in order to engage the Fellows' interest and curiosity, I had to reappraise the tenets and first principles of my proposal. I presented other versions at intervals at invited talks at the Institute of Entomology in České Budějovice (Czech Republic), Imperial College at Silwood Park (England), the Freie Universität in Berlin and the German Centre for Integrative Biodiversity Research (iDiv) in Leipzig. During successive revisions for these talks, it became clear that I had to disengage from the mental organization formed over several decades of teaching community ecology to undergraduate and graduate students, in parallel to the field and theoretical work that my research group carried out in the same period. My personal history of these ideas was not the best guide to tackling them systematically.

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<sup>1</sup> With a few exceptions, I chose not to cite names because I would have to acknowledge most members of the Wiko community: Fellows, partners, staff, direction, visitors.

From the beginning, I had envisaged two work phases, and these now became uncoupled. The first part was designed as a historical appraisal of distinct research programs that coexisted, more or less autonomously, in community ecology up to the end of the 20th century. Feedback and conversations following on seminars encouraged me to expand this to a book-length treatment, instead of the two papers that I had in mind. Flattering and tempting as this is, I will let this decision mature while giving precedence to the other part of my work at Wiko.

The second focus is more complex. It entails an overview of contemporary ecology in order to assess the current standing of community ecology, which has been undergoing striking changes in recent years. These changes combine technical breakthroughs with a different theoretical and statistical culture and are driven by demands to increase community ecology's applicability to the conservation, management and use of ecological systems. The best option to tackle these issues was to recruit a group of collaborators, which was accomplished in a workshop at Wiko midway through the residence period.<sup>2</sup> I was fortunate in bringing together a select set of participants including two Co-Fellows (only a few of whom would designate themselves "community ecologists"), who contributed to enriching the approaches and viewpoints on our central themes.

The main outcome of our workshop was a shift in focus and strategy. Instead of the more abstract conceptual review that I had in mind, we moved towards mapping out recent lines of work, with the intent to highlight currently underexplored cross-links that could lead to significant advances in our understanding of the organization and dynamics of communities. This is in the process of being written up as a multi-authored paper that, in turn, will be followed by further explorations of specific issues.

My Wiko residence allowed a prolonged reconsideration of work in which I have been engaged for a long time, but always wedged in between other pressing tasks and engagements. This leisurely and deeper reassessment of choices and ways of pursuing them will serve me for years to come and is one of the most valuable legacies of the residence.

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<sup>2</sup> I thank the EURIAS network for the funds that, supplemented by resources and especially by organizational support from the Wiko, made this meeting possible. I have never before hosted a meeting with such outstanding support; this allowed me to concentrate exclusively on the work itself.

## Emergent Properties

The Wiko community comprises everybody who lives and works in it: Fellows, partners, directors, Permanent Fellows, and the entire staff, which is committed to make the Fellows' residence pleasant and fruitful beyond measure. The degree of staff involvement and interest in our activities is hard to convey, and its importance cannot be overstated.

The cycle of Fellows' colloquia are our sole formal commitment within Wiko. Each of these 40-plus presentations, plus their intense discussion, was a feast of ideas that could often take over the entire week to follow up and rethink. I filled an entire notebook in the colloquia and other presentations; it has been ages since I took so many notes. As I look them over, the wide range of themes, content and presentation styles is again apparent. No matter how diverse, presentations coincided in their depth and uncompromising honesty, giving priceless insights into the inner workings of remarkable artistic and scientific endeavours.

To my mind, however, the centre of the Wiko experience is the interactions that develop over the long term. Nurtured (and well nourished) during the daily joint meals, threads of conversation ranged from hilarious trivia to substantial discussions. I would like to stress that, in the close to 200 meals that we shared, there were no noticeable persistent clusters of people. Apart from pre-organized tables, Fellows, partners, visitors and staff seemed to recombine freely on every occasion – an impression shared by other Fellows. This may be a distinguishing feature of our year's class.

Several informal discussion threads developed into unexpected exchanges and collaborations that, within ecological theory, could qualify as *emergent properties*: outcomes of interactions that are unpredictable on the basis of the individual properties or behaviour of the interactors. For instance, the "Sci-Hum Forum" was created to offer a space for debating contrasts and convergences between sciences and humanities, a recurring motif that was sensitively picked up and fostered by the Wiko direction. Within this forum, I had the opportunity to cooperate with Karin Kukkonen on an open discussion of Narratives in Evolutionary Biology and in Literary Studies. This was a high point among the activities in which I had the privilege of participating, and I would very much enjoy developing it further.

I also received both stimulating and sobering advice from several Co-Fellows, peers in their fields, on additional interests, especially on the visual representation of theoretical concepts in ecology and on biological theories of recent human history.

## Disembarking from the Wiko Cruise

In the final weeks in June, the short walk from the Wiko to Villa Walther took a strange turn; unreality seemed to be overtaking the real ending, a sense heightened by the intense summer light and heat blasting into Berlin. Even for a Brazilian, 38 degrees in the shade is hot. However: as I write, after a few weeks and from ten thousand kilometres away, paradoxically the Wiko recollection remains very vivid and acute and I revisit it several times a day.

Nothing before came even close to this year's experience, and nothing is likely to in the future. I suppose many of us would gladly have carried on for another month, or at least to a full year's completion. Then again, maybe not; realizing that the Wiko term has an unalterable finishing point is part of its enchantment, as an extended cruise with illustrious company under the most pleasant circumstances comes to a foreseeable end.

The rich fare of creative, artistic and scientific ideas that was on continuous offer proved irresistible. This is an obvious reason for applying for a Fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin in the first place; still, there is a tension between focusing on one's own project and the urge to make the most of the ongoing experiences that we are invited to partake of within the Wiko community.

## Free Intellectual Pursuit as Political Resistance

Can I somehow describe my personal legacy from this extended Fellowship?

Several of the Fellows in this year's class live in countries where intellectuals are now aggressively discredited in official discourse, facts are summarily dismissed and coherence or cogency are irrelevant. In stark contrast, the Wiko residence offered unsurpassable conditions and stimulus for free creative and intellectual exploration. That is: the unapologetic and unconstrained exploration of ideas for their own worth, or for their sheer pleasure.

The full import of this experience became evident as soon as we returned home. In the Brazil of 2019, every unconstrained cultural or intellectual pursuit is truly an act of political resistance. I have yet to find out whether, on returning to my country under conditions that have seriously deteriorated in these ten months, the Wiko experience will enhance resilience or only heighten awareness of our vulnerability. These feelings are tempered by recalled conversations with Co-Fellows whose countries are in far worse condition and who attended Wiko as expatriates (yes, I remember that even this label was debated).

The disruptive polarisation that is fast expanding in so many countries kept me constantly aware that I was in Berlin, which a century ago was incubating a similar threat. The Berlin Wiko is no ivory tower, and I cannot disentangle the pursuit of intellectual excellence from the urgency of engaging more effectively in the defence of civil freedoms, especially of the unrestricted exercise of critical thought. This feeling was best expressed in György Dragomán's deeply moving text that he read at our farewell party.

The best of the legacy from this Fellowship is the admiration and affection for Fellows, partners and Wiko members. I formed more friendships in these ten months than in as many years within my university. Why is that? On the Wiko side, this is no accident: Fellows are brought together in ways that instigate friendship. Within academic institutions, most contacts beyond departmental boundaries are too fleeting or task-centered to support more durable contact and, unless faculty clubs or nearby bars are part of regular academic life, there are few alternative opportunities to form such bonds. A pity: infusing some of the Wiko spirit would help universities to live up to their name.