



IN SEARCH OF “ARTIFICIAL TONGUES”
FOR TARGETING AND REMOVING TOXIC
METALS IN WATER
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Having previously stayed in a similar Institute for Advanced Study (IAS), my expectation when coming to Wiko was straightforward – to enjoy a serene environment and solitude to continue to ponder my research and make meaningful advances. This time, however, I had a really ambitious goal. My plan was to write and submit six original research

articles for publication by the end of my three-month stay at Wiko. Regardless of how insane this might seem, I certainly hoped to accomplish this goal because I already had the data to process for these six papers and, as I told myself, “All I need is the space to think and write.” Indeed, I had the space – a well-furnished room with a lovely desk and a sweet, cozy bed just within about three meters away. Yes, I requested to have my office space within my bedroom because I was so ambitious prior to coming to Wiko that I felt stepping out from my bedroom to walk to another office to do my work could be a loss of precious time. Yes, that’s how overly ambitious I was, but soon I realized that there was something different and interesting about Wiko.

Unlike my past experience at an IAS, Wiko had a formal welcome reception of all Fellows within the first few days of our arrival, which enabled me to settle in rather more quickly and comfortably. In fact, all the emails I was receiving from the “preparing your stay” team were enough to suggest to me that Wiko was going to offer me an incredible experience, and it did not take me long after I arrived to recognize this. I especially loved the “cheat sheets” that highlighted all the Fellows’ and staff’s profiles. It really did make it easy for me to identify and bond with all the other Fellows and the staff as well. Even before the first, formal welcome meeting and lunch, I had “ticked” a few Fellows on the list that I wanted to interact with. So I did not need any further introduction to identify these Fellows. The great lunch that accompanied this welcome reception and subsequently the everyday lunches, coupled with the exquisite Thursday dinners, were enough for me to realize that my initial ambition of completing two research articles every month was not just overly ambitious, but actually insane. There was much more to learn and enjoy at Wiko than just brooding over data processing and writing research articles.

Right from the day of my arrival, I knew that Wiko would not only offer me the space to think, but also an opportunity to feel at home and connect with people. Vera Pfeffer of the “preparing your stay” team really gave me the warmest arrival reception I could get. Eventually, I realized that the entire “preparing your stay” team, as well as the entire staff – from the reception to the restaurant, to the library, to admissions, to the Head of Academic Programs and Rector’s offices – were just amazing people with fantastic human relation skills that could make any Fellow feel a great sense of belonging and the opportunity to do more while in residence.

Then, as if the Fellows were also purposively selected to be respectful of and supportive to each other, Wiko became such a place to develop yourself physically, mentally, and even spiritually. The diverse backgrounds (academically, culturally, geographically, etc.)

coupled with the fact that these Fellows are top-notch in their respective fields makes it exciting and fulfilling to interact with and feel a part of it all. Chatting with these geeks not only gave me the opportunity to learn new things outside my field of chemistry, but I even gained broader and insightful perspectives into my own research. I was very much impressed with the rich perspectives I received after I presented my research during one of the Fellows' Colloquia. Before my Colloquium I was still battling with ideas about refining my research – the identification of DNA aptamers for fabricating biosensors, which I coin “artificial tongues,” to remove toxic metals in drinking water. Little did I expect that “non-chemist” Co-Fellows could help me reshape my thoughts about a rather “chemistry-dense” topic. The questions and follow-on discussions after my seminar really did help me to rethink my research and unravel new ideas to move my research in a better direction.

It was also amazing to learn how connected some of these Fellows were and how they could easily recommend resources and contacts to broaden my network and knowledge. Eventually, I felt my ambition was better shaped, I was writing to make an impact and not just for the numbers. I was still able to complete and submit three research articles for publication before I left Wiko. Even better, the connections I made, the new ideas I gained, and the new friends I made would remain long-lasting and fulfilling to me.

Beyond my academic, my social and physical life also improved while I was at Wiko. I had no idea that I could complete a 3km run, but with a team of some dedicated running mates, who eventually became like a family to me, I left Wiko with the capacity to run 8km in just about 45 minutes. Beyond the run was another team of table tennis players who also shaped me to become a better ping-pong player. Indeed, I will miss a lot from Wiko.

I am exceptionally thankful to Jana Petri, the Academic Coordinator of the College for Life Sciences for providing long-lasting networking opportunities not only to me, but to all the College for Life Science Fellows in residence. Through her support and persistent efforts to help us succeed, I was able to establish remarkable new research collaborations within Germany.

Finally, I would like to commend and recommend Wiko to continue to provide such a healthy and friendly environment for its Fellows. As someone who has previously been in a similar Institute for Advanced Study, the Tuesday and Thursday Colloquia were not something new to me, but the initiative to allow Fellows to choose their own “introducers” was something I found quite creative and calming. To anyone willing to learn new things while accomplishing so much in his own research career, I would recommend considering taking up a fellowship at Wiko.