

Life isn't something you retire from

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In René Schwarzenbach's view, research should not be confined to one's own discipline and should venture beyond the bounds of academia. Only a transdisciplinary approach can broaden scientific horizons and promote dialogue with stakeholders and society. He laments the tendency of ranking systems to encourage a return to discipline-oriented research and generate predictable science.

René, you officially retired in January 2011, but it was still quite difficult to find a time to speak to you here at the ETH. Have you taken on board the Federal Council's plans to raise the retirement age?

Hardly! The real question is: retirement from what? Not from life, I hope! Because for me there's never been a clear distinction between work and leisure, and since I have no trouble in letting go and moving on, I don't really feel as if I've retired at all. What has changed, and what I'm very much enjoying, is that for over two years now I've been able to largely determine my agenda myself and, above all, according to the pleasure principle. So though I'm still involved in higher education to some extent, my activities have increasingly shifted away from research and teaching as such towards the management and communication of science. But there's also more room for other things, such as non-academic lecturing on water and sustainability issues, seeing friends and, most important, spending time with my family – especially my wife and our two grandchildren.

You've moved on from your Chair at the ETH, but some things you haven't let go of – for example, your satirical alter ego, Professor Ranzenhuber.

That's right, he's been pursuing me for more than 20 years now, and I trust he'll continue to do so. Incidentally, I'd never have taken up any position which would have prevented me from performing as a revue artist at the same time. For that reason alone, I could never have become Director of Eawag or President of the ETH (laughs). The character of Ranzenhuber lets me articulate plainly things I could never possibly say as a "normal" professor.

As well as a much-cited work on environmental organic chemistry, you've also initiated and co-edited non-academic publications like the visual reader Who Owns the Water? Well, who does it belong to?

The idea of asking this question was to encourage readers to reflect for themselves on the planet's most important resource. If you want to know how we try to answer this question, then you should read the epilogue – which, by the way, is entitled "Water belongs to us all – an appeal".

So, in the water sector, what are the biggest challenges for the future?

The same ones we already face today, only in many parts of the world they will be further accentuated by climate change. That's why water is also one of the main themes of our second visual reader – For Climate's Sake! – because climate change will also lead to changes in global and regional hydrological cycles. The consequences predicted by climate research include greater water scarcity in some areas, and even more water in others. Among the biggest challenges are, for example, global food production, provision of water supplies and wastewater management for ever-expanding cities and, of course, the fact that almost two billion people still lack adequate access to clean water.

That's the global picture; how do you see the future for Switzerland? And for Eawag?

With regard to water – as in so many other ways – we in Switzerland are among the world's most privileged. But that does not mean this country will not have any challenges to address in this sector, and so we won't need Eawag any more. On the contrary. The challenges at the national level include, for example, the renewal of our very costly drinking water and wastewater infrastructure, the conflict between the use of our water resources for energy production and ecological concerns, or the growing development-related pressures on surface and groundwaters. And a lot also remains to be done in Switzerland as regards chronic exposure of the environment to chemical pollutants, even though the position here is good compared with many other parts of the world.

What was it about Eawag that kept you here for 28 years, from 1977 to 2005?

For me, what was special about Eawag was that it covered the entire spectrum from basic research to practical problem-solving. I also – as well as many wonderful colleagues – had found a place where I was able to pursue my discipline, chemistry, within a systems-oriented, interdisciplinary environment – and to work in an incredibly motivating and pleasantly relaxed atmosphere. In addition, the conditions under which Eawag operated allowed us to study almost anything we wanted to. That, incidentally, was true and remains true not just of Eawag, but of the entire ETH Domain. So we were able to do pioneering work that would not have been possible elsewhere. Eawag also played a key role in establishing the Environmental Sciences programme at the ETH, which also gave me a unique opportunity to contribute to the development of what has turned out to be a great success story.

What has changed since that time?

Compared to the situation today, we were able at that time to spend much longer as “primary producers” in research, working as a team in the field and in the lab – now, of course, postdocs already expect to have their own doctoral students. I didn't have the support of a doctoral student until I was 40. Unfortunately, in the meantime, quite a few things have changed for the worse, largely because of the growing obsession with publication and citation data. Apart from anything else, this is encouraging a return to discipline-oriented research, rather than an increasing focus on important inter- and transdisciplinary questions. In my view, publication pressures are also responsible for the production of increasingly predictable science – published, moreover, in homeopathic quantities. Today, anything at all can be published.

Is there anything a small institution like Eawag could do to counter these trends?

Why not at least try – together with other world-leading higher-education and research institutions – to develop an alternative system of performance assessment, based on a more holistic and sophisticated view? And thus put an end to today's rankings, based on just a few, sometimes questionable indicators? Funnily enough, almost everyone actually agrees about this – but it is, of course, extremely difficult to break this commercially backed, internationally established “terror regime”. Even without any rankings, it would be easy to judge whether an institution is a leader at the national and international level – if, that is, it is globally visible and its graduates are universally in demand. Eawag, for example, has managed to establish – in the academic and professional spheres, both nationally and internationally – a strong network of excellent people.

What direction should environmental research now take?

Environmental research, or rather the people working in this field, should always bear in mind the real tasks they have to perform: raising public awareness of environmental issues, drawing attention to important environmental problems at an early stage and delivering integrated approaches for solving problems which are often interrelated. That can't be done in an ivory tower, but only in a close dialogue

with society.

Further information

Special issue of Environmental Science & Technology; René P. Schwarzenbach tribute, 2 July 2013; Vol. 47, No. 13 (full access for subscribers only)

<http://pubs.acs.org/toc/esthag/47/13> ; [Eawag Director Janet Hering on René Schwarzenbach](#) (“Viewpoint” article from ES&T special issue) [12 questions for René Schwarzenbach](#); [GAIA 22/1 2013, pp. 6–7](#) (access for subscribers only) Visual readers: [Who Owns the Water?](#) and [For Climate's Sake!](#)

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<https://www.eawag.ch/en/info/portal/news/news-archive/archive-detail/life-isnt-something-you-retire-from>