

Erfahrungsbericht einer Humboldtianerin

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In March of 2020, as the world shut down, countries stopping flights and closing their airspace like a string of dominos falling, we finally made contact via satellite messenger with our team deep in the forest in the Republic of Congo. Having gotten another graduate student onto the last flight out of Panama earlier that morning, we now had to decide whether our team of students and researchers should set out on the three-day trip to Brazzaville, hoping that flights would still be leaving and we could evacuate the group once they reached the capital, or if, instead, it would be safer to stay where they were, protected by their remoteness from the pandemic that was sweeping across the globe.



Installation einer Kamerafalle. Foto: privat.

These were not the challenges I imagined I'd be facing when, in the fall of 2019, we packed up our house in California and moved to the Bodensee to take a position as an AvH Professor at the University of Konstanz. We had those too, of course: finding a place to live in a notoriously tight housing market, frustration (both mine and my German husband's) with the slow pace of my language acquisition, befuddlement at the unspoken rules that governed the ebb and flow of University life—both at my daughter's kinderhaus (so many types of shoes. . .so many ways to have dressed her in the wrong pair) and within my

academic department (on-time is late, late is . . .). But sending the members of your fledgling lab home and into lock-down, only a few months after they'd arrived; postponing, again and again, the field seasons and research plans which had motivated them to move to Germany in the first place; watching them struggle (and struggling yourself) with uncertainty, isolation and growing frustration—I wasn't prepared.

Field research of the type we do in my lab—directly observing and electronically tracking the interactions of social animals in forests, savannahs and deserts to understand how they build their societies, how their societies work—requires a willingness to give up control and an ability to make the best of things. Even, and perhaps especially, when things are not going well. Unexpected storms will bring down trees—if you are lucky, they won't fall on your tent (at least not while you are inside). Insects will eat through the wires in your electronics—hopefully you prepared and have spares. Camera traps will get broken or stolen, animals will fly away with tags full of data and all your carefully made plans will disintegrate before your eyes.



Installation einer Kamerafalle. Foto: privat.

Field workers are resilient; our professional skillset consists, primarily, of re-branding failure as success. And in the early days of the pandemic, we were and we did. Virtual co-working and online game-nights provided us with a social life-line that was so important for a group of recent transplants to Germany, locked up alone in our apartments. We invested in the foundations of the research group we wanted to build, establishing open-data science processes and standards for ourselves, developing field safety plans for the work we would

do when it became possible again. Although new data collection came to a complete halt, we looked at old data in new ways, pushing our research in directions it might never otherwise have gone. But as days became weeks, weeks became months, months passed the year mark and travel restrictions separated us from our families and made our work impossible, it seemed that we all, one by one, began to turn inwards. Planning for the future began to feel like an act of futility rather than optimism as, again and again, borders opened, research logistics were organized, only to be cancelled as new corona variants emerged and travel restrictions returned.



Bei der Beobachtung von Pavianen. Foto: privat.

I feel extremely fortunate to have been in Germany during the pandemic. Thanks to the super-human efforts of one of my colleagues in the Biology Department, convenient, fast, free PCR testing at the University of Konstanz got students back in classrooms, researchers back in labs and our kids back in the kinderhaus. Compared to my Panamanian colleagues who, for months on end, were only allowed to leave their houses every other day for a 2-hour window determined by the number on their national ID card, the constraints on our movement and activity weren't so bad. Compared to my US colleagues who had to teach in-person, without mask mandates, I felt protected by the institutional decisions made to safeguard our health. But COVID still inflicted damage.

Back in the office now, face-to-face, we're trying to make up for lost time, lost interactions. The first data are coming back from long-delayed projects. For me, energy and creativity are returning, slowly but surely. Deeply entrenched habit pushes me towards a narrative that turns the failures of the pandemic years into successes: COVID brought us together, we supported each other and are coming out the other side stronger. But I don't really believe it. Around me at the office, I see the exhaustion, the fraying of the relationships that holds a group together. People's priorities have changes; my priorities have changed.

In the end, we got everyone home. It involved motorbikes and boats and buses, cancelled evacuation flight after cancelled evacuation flight, and was topped off by a race against the clock from Charles de Gaulle airport to the about-to-close Dutch border, but everyone ended up where they needed to be. And that is success enough.