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“A driving force for more species conservation”

German Environmental Prize 2020
Honorary Award for entomologist Dr Martin Sorg

Krefeld. This year’s German Environmental Award will be a bit different: the German Environmental Foundation (DBU) is awarding Dr Martin Sorg (65, Krefeld) with a Prize of Honour. The entomologist played a significant role in research warning against the loss of species diversity. As it stands today, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier will present the Honorary Award, which comes with EUR 10,000 in prize money, in Hannover on 25 October 2020.

A turning point in public opinion

“Dr Martin Sorg was the driving force behind the methodical standards developed by the “Entomologischer Verein Krefeld” (Krefeld Entomological Society) and the insect biodiversity studies carried out there,” says DBU General Secretary Alexander Bonde. Thanks to Dr Sorg and the Society, “the decline in insect populations, even in nature reserves, is being talked about and species protection has now moved to the top of the agenda.” Bonde adds: “In Germany, his efforts and his persistence have helped to make the decline of insect populations a high ranked topic in society.” With his scientific analyses, Sorg has elicited both a national and an international response in the media and in the field of scientific research, which in turn has resulted in political conferences and citizens’ movements.

One year ago, the Global Assessment Report presented by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services demonstrated just how dramatic the current situation is in terms of species conservation: according to this report, around one million species are in danger of going extinct in the coming years and decades. “With his efforts at the Krefeld Entomological Society, Martin Sorg has used long-term studies on insect populations to demonstrate how important species conservation is,” says the DBU General Secretary.

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Indeed, the Society's research on the population decline of flying insects from 1989 to 2016 formed the basis of a statistical study that was published in October 2017 together with scientists from the University of Sussex (Great Britain) and Radboud University (Netherlands). "Previously, there were very few standardised examinations over an extended period of time available for comparable evaluations and interpretation of results," says Bonde.

According to Bonde, the research also made an impact internationally, so much so that it marked a turning point in the public perception of insects and their importance for ecosystems. As a result, referendums for species conservation that were submitted in various German federal states referred to the results of the "Krefeld Study", which was published in 2017 and illustrated the dramatic insect population losses.

The impact of the scientific method

In this case, the development of methodological standards and their consistent application over decades resulted in scientifically valid data. This data proved that we are experiencing the loss of not only a few endangered species, but rather of the entire volume of flying insects by around 76 per cent in just three years. The scientists' main concern: food chains and entire ecosystems could be at risk. "Dr Sorg's efforts have played a crucial role in ensuring that researchers' warnings about massive loss of biodiversity are taken seriously," says DBU General Secretary Bonde.

Persistent and profound dedication

In the meantime, the connection between the loss of insect populations and intensive agricultural practices has been confirmed not only by entomologists, but also by agricultural researchers and farming associations. "And species conservation is a topic that is no longer restricted to the field of science," says Bonde. "The society-wide debate is already well underway. The demands made by various associations and organisations for a shift in our agricultural policies makes it clear that the environment and agriculture are two sides of the same coin, and that both have to be involved in the solutions that we need for a sustainable future." According to Bonde, Sorg and the Krefeld Entomological Society have demonstrated that "through persistent, profound dedication, each and every one of us can make a contribution to this important debate about our future."

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