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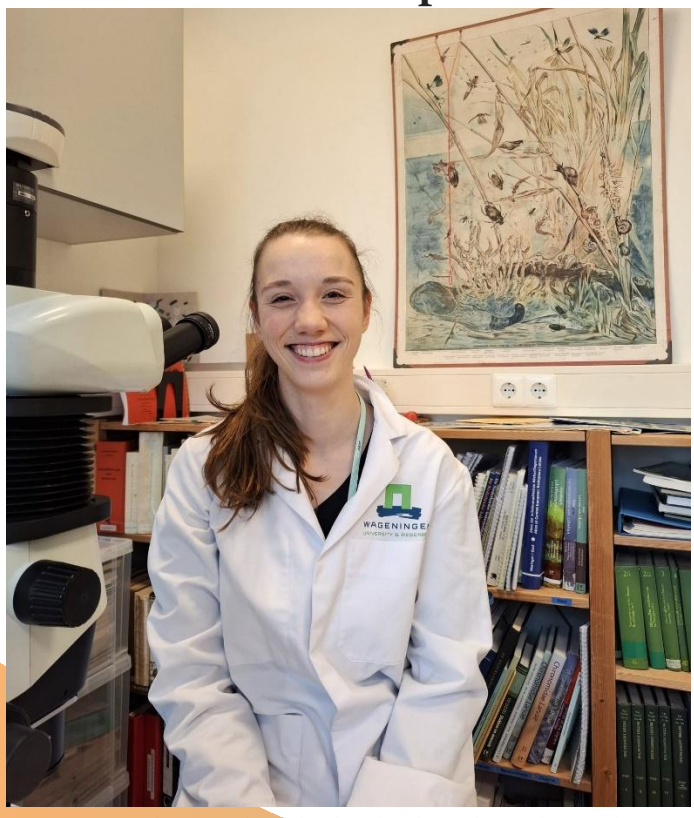
-Judith Epping-

Please introduce yourself and give us an overview on your research focus and expertise.



My name is Judith Epping and I am a PhD Candidate in the Aquatic Ecology and Water Quality Management Group at Wageningen University & Research in The Netherlands. In my PhD I am studying the impact of different biopesticides on aquatic organisms. My research specialization currently is in aquatic ecotoxicology but I prefer to be considered a "generalist". I have interdisciplinary expertise with a bachelor's degree in agricultural science, specifically plant sciences, and a master's degree in environmental science where I focus on aquatic ecology with a little bit of soil science and even a minor thesis in behavioral ecology on cognition in guppies.

What drew you to pursue a career in science, specifically in your field of research?

I like to say I am doing scientific research because it never gets boring, there is always more to learn. Especially in aquatic ecology I get to explore an environment that remains hidden to most people. When I see a lake or a ditch, I think of all the macroinvertebrates, zooplankton or algae I have looked at under the microscope. Some organisms give information about the water quality for example, if there are a lot or very little nutrients or how much oxygen is in the water. It's a whole world of biodiversity with beautiful, unique organisms and I have the privilege to contribute to their protection through my work. Besides that, I enjoy that there is no real day-to-day in my job. I could be on field work, in meetings, in the lab, at a conference, exchanging ideas with colleagues, teaching or supervising students. No day is the same and that provides a lot of room for curiosity, professional and personal growth.

What are the main skills to build your career in science and engage with others in the scientific community?

There is a great essay by Martin A. Schwartz published in 2008 titled "The importance of stupidity in scientific research".My personal take away is: in science you can never know everything, and you have to learn to be okay with always feeling a little bit "stupid" to be a good scientist. Scientific research is a path that equally requires resilience and curiosity in my opinion. It can be very challenging at times, but when you finally figure out a problem you have been stuck at for a while it is also incredibly rewarding. Not giving up, and holding on to this drive to want to know more are essentials for me. At the same time, you have to have a set of what is often called "soft skills". One key skill is knowing when to ask for help, it can save you so much time and energy and you might expand your scientific network along the way. Another important skill is being able to communicate your research to different types of audiences for example, other scientists, students, stakeholders, or to friends and family. And, maybe the most important skill of all: taking care of yourself!

Can you tell us about an achievement you're particularly proud of?

One scientific achievement that I am really proud of was publishing my first paper, my minor thesis from my master's degree. It felt like the ultimate confirmation that I might be able to become a scientist. Not only because it got published but also because the topic was not my main study focus, just something I thought would be interesting to explore for a minor thesis without any prior knowledge to any of the related subjects. I showed myself that I could deep dive into this topic and learn enough about it to successfully conduct an experiment and publish my results. It also helped me to accept that not everybody can be or needs to be a highly specialized scientist. Especially in my field of research being able to understand many different environments, methods and scientific disciplines is quite essential. Realizing that I am capable to do that, was a big confidence boost, and I still let that fuel my ambitions now.

What advice would you give to your female colleagues and the next generation of women in science?

Be more confident! Imposter syndrome is extremely common in academia and even more so amongst female researchers. I often notice during meetings that especially younger women are not speaking up as much, are more likely to discuss issues amongst peers than with supervisors or just silently deal with them themselves instead of asking for help. In the field of ecology, and my chair group specifically (almost all of our PhDs are women!), it is much less noticeable than in other scientific disciplines, at least from my experience, but we can still reduce the amount of self-doubt by a good notch. Especially for a PhD, in the end it is your project with your name on top, you should be confident enough to shape it so that you get the most out of it!