

A research chair for lakes

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Topics: Ecosystems | Organisation & Staff

EPFL, Eawag and Ferring Pharmaceuticals are inaugurating a Chair for the study of lake environments. The partnership aims to improve our understanding and protection of these vital and fragile ecosystems.

Founded more than 100 years ago by vaudois scientist François-Alphonse Forel, limnology, or the study of lakes, is returning to its roots. On December 3, 2012, EPFL inaugurates the Margaretha Kamprad Chair in limnology and environmental science, in the presence of Frederik Paulsen, CEO of Ferring, and Ingvar Kamprad, the founder of Ikea. The Chair will be supported by Ferring Pharmaceuticals, who will provide CHF 5 million in the context of a private-public partnership. It will be dedicated to the study of lake ecosystems, which are fragile and often heavily affected by human activity. Alfred Wüest, a world renowned expert in aquatic physics, has been nominated to hold the Chair.

Limnology, or the “oceanography of lakes”

Limnology is to lakes as oceanography is to oceans. However, these two environments have significant differences, explains Wüest. “Lakes are relatively closed ecosystems; they are much more sensitive to pollution, and the way current circulate in them is very different. For example, we find what we call “stratification” phenomena, in which different layers of water mix very little with one another.” Billions of human beings depend on the health of these freshwater reservoirs, which are being subjected to increasing environmental pressure.

Wüest’s research focuses on the study of biological phenomena in Lake Geneva, particularly phytoplankton – which are both an indicator of the health status of the lake and the first link in the lake’s food chain. In the next two years, the bulk of his work will be conducted in the context of the elemo program, which includes a component to explore Lake Geneva and Lake Baïkal (Russia) using ultralight aircraft equipped with multiple sensors.

Uniting scientific research on Lake Geneva

Lake Geneva, the largest lake in Western Europe, provides an exceptional research opportunity for local scientists. “The goal of this Chair is to bring together all the research that’s being done on lake environments by scientists in every field, in Switzerland and in neighboring France,” the scientist explains.

The Chair already includes a Senior Scientist, and the first PhD student will start work in January. Wüest will split his time with the Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology (Eawag), where he is head of the Aquatic Physics group.

Ferring, key sponsor and originator of the elemo scientific exploration program, thus reiterates its support for the study of lake environments as well as its commitment to the Lake Geneva region, where it has established its head office. Paulsen has chosen to give the Chair the name of Margaretha Kamprad. “I had the great fortune to know the wife of my dear friend Ingvar Kamprad, Margaretha Kamprad. From our conversations, I know she loved nature, and she would have been very pleased to have been associated with this new and important research center,” he explains.

This Chair in limnology is on the EPFL campus, its offices just 100 meters from the shores of Lake Geneva, where the discipline itself was born just over a hundred years ago.

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Contact



Andri Bryner

Media officer

Tel. +41 58 765 5104

andri.bryner@eawag.ch

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