

Obituary Prof. Dr. Wolfram Dunger



Prof. Dr. Wolfram Dunger (1999)

Photo: SMNG

On the 24th January 2019 the former director of the Senckenberg Museum of Natural History Görlitz (formerly the Staatliches Museum für Naturkunde Görlitz) Prof. Dr. Wolfram Dunger passed away at the age of 89. The employees of the Museum, his colleagues and friends will always remember him as an international authority on soil zoology and as the ‘leader of the Museum’.

Wolfram Dunger became director of the Museum für Naturkunde Görlitz (Forschungsstelle) on 16th December 1959. At that time the Museum was already a research institute. The scientific staff, however, comprised only him and two other biologists. Following his own research interests, Wolfram Dunger introduced soil zoology as the Museum’s research focus, which was unique among German natural history museums. His research on the development of soil-animal communities in former lignite mines was the first study describing the succession from its earliest stages. This research, as well as the first description of the processes during decomposition of litter, attracted

broad interest among soil biologists. The succession of soil-animal communities also became the focus of other scientists at the Museum and made both the Museum and Dunger himself well known within the international scientific community. His taxonomic work on Collembola, describing many species as well as creating and amending early determination keys, were fundamental to the developing knowledge on these important soil animals and helped make them accessible to soil zoologists throughout Europe. Due to his personal impact on the initial development of contemporary soil zoology, which inspired many colleagues, Dunger may be considered as the founder of modern soil zoology in Germany.

During his time as director, Wolfram Dunger developed the museum in Görlitz from a regional museum to a research institution of international reputation and relevance. While he was director, the number of curators increased from three to 17. With his personality and vision he succeeded in gathering numerous talented young scientists; and he nurtured their development into

taxonomic specialists in their chosen taxa. Furthermore, he made the collections of the Museum not 'only' a taxonomic resource but also an ecological/conservational archive of soil and soil organisms in space and time by correlating physico-chemical, vegetation, land-use, soil-type and other sample data to those on the distribution of animals and coenoses.

Although he focused (nearly) exclusively on soil animals in his scientific work (especially Collembola, Myriapoda and Lumbricidae), he was a biologist with a broad expertise who also fulfilled all duties of a museum director by developing exhibitions, organizing talks and using the Museum as a place of public education. He was also an engaged academic teacher, working as a lecturer at, for instance, the Humboldt University in Berlin and the Technical University in Dresden, and since 1990 as an honorary professor at the University of Leipzig.

Wolfram Dunger published over a period of 55 years, and his list of publications comprises 230 original articles, reviews, contributions to textbooks and monographs; for nearly 40 years he was editor-in-chief of 'Abhandlungen und Berichte des Naturkundemuseums Görlitz', which later became 'Soil Organisms'. During his editorship many relevant articles on his ecological research were published in this journal and contributed to its global reputation. In 1994, he initiated the 'Synopsis on Palaearctic Collembola', authoring the first volume and editing most of those that followed. The series became a comprehensive reference on these important soil animals and a compendium of our recent knowledge on their taxonomy and systematics, also referring to zoogeography and ecological traits.

Wolfram Dunger always felt closely connected to the regional tradition of the Museum, which originated from the Naturforschende Gesellschaft zu Görlitz, founded in

1811. Already during GDR times, he organized triennial workshops as an exchange forum for Upper Lusatian regional science. Thanks to his initiative and networking, the Society was refounded in 1990 as the Naturforschende Gesellschaft der Oberlausitz. Subsequently, he was president of the Society and editor-in-chief of its journal for nearly two decades.

Wolfram Dunger successfully protected the Museum and its employees against political and economic threats and oppressiveness. More than once he succeeded, against pressure from 'above', in preventing its closure. After the changes in 1989/90, he steered the transfer of the Museum into a state museum of the Free State of Saxony under the supervision of the Saxonian State Ministry for Science and Art. During this process, the evaluations by international experts consistently gave excellent recommendations of the Museum and its research. At the end of September 1995, Wolfram Dunger retired as director, but for many years he continued actively working at the Museum.

All his former employees and colleagues admired his enthusiasm, personality and expertise, but also his strategic talent as a leader. Without any doubt, most of us would not be here if he would not have developed the Museum into what it is today. We miss him and will always honor his memory.

Willi E.R. Xylander, Hermann Ansorge,
Birgit Balkenhol, Ulrich Burkhardt, Axel Christian,
Ulrike Damm, Christian Düker, Petra Gebauer,
Karin Hohberg, John M.C. Hutchinson, Ricarda
Lehmitz, Volker Otte, Heike Reise, Christiane Ritz,
David J. Russell, Bettina Schlitt, Hans-Jürgen Schulz,
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Karsten Wesche