
Fish Harvesting and Fish Parasitology Course

Fish Harvesting and Fish Parasitology Course

As a Biology Erasmus student at Charles University, I was given the option to attend the unique course "Field Course in Fish Parasitology". The course takes place outside of Prague, at the Field Biology Station Ruda by Veselí nad Lužnicí which is in South Bohemia. Organised and run by Dr. Libor Mikeš and Associate Professor Jan Votýpka, we were invited to watch the traditional Czech carp harvesting and then perform dissections to observe the parasites of the fish.

With no knowledge of Czech traditions, I was surprised to learn that fried carp with potato salad is the national Christmas dish of the Czech Republic. 'Výlov rybníku' (fish harvesting) has occurred each autumn in the Czech Republic for hundreds of years. Each Christmas the harvested carp can be bought from fish mongers that appear on Czech streets a few days before the 24th December, selling the live fish out of barrels.

This large scale fishing industry has existed in the Czech Republic since the 14th century. The height of the fish industry was probably 16th century when highly skilled builders were commissioned to create fish ponds that could be stocked to feed the nation.

The method of harvesting involves partially draining the man-made fish ponds to push the fish into the deepest areas. Fishing boats can then use a net to easily catch and pull the fish to the shore, where handheld nets and buckets are used to transport the catch into the waiting storage units.

To be quite honest, having to wake up at four in the morning was not what I expected to do on my Erasmus year. I packed every piece of warm clothing I owned and left my hall of residence for one of the last night trams. Meeting a Spanish girl in my hall of residence lift at this early hour, we quickly realised we would be spending the day together as classmates. With the sun not yet risen we travelled together through the sleeping city to our arranged collection point and waited for our professors to arrive.

The early wake-up call was absolutely necessary, as we had to travel 120 km to reach the pond where the course took place. Although the day was overcast drizzly and cold, the grey colours of the landscape were still really beautiful. Already stalls selling beer and dried or live fish were set up and the area was buzzing with activity. School children, news crews as well as locals and traditionally dressed fisher men and women were all present and an aura of excitement was in the misty air.

As the crowd stood around the water edge, we watched as the fishing boats worked together to cast their net and bring the fish back to the shore. Keeping the boats in a tight circle, the net serves as a huge, underwater basket that is full of squirming fish. Silver buckets are floated around the circle as each fisherman places fish into it and when full it is carried away to the truck waiting on the shore.

The course is for both Erasmus and Czech students. Besides myself, all the other Erasmus students participating this year were Spanish - so the spare time was spent learning various handy Spanish phrases! As we spent the cold morning sharing English and Spanish biscuits, the teachers collected the various fish specimens that we would later be dissecting. They arrived with two large bags full of fish and we left for the Field Biology Station to begin our experiments.

With all collected fish specimens placed into an old bathtub and wheelbarrow, we were prepped on the day's events. Speaking in both Czech and English, the atmosphere was relaxed as our lesson plan was explained.

The aim of our experiment was to find and identify different species of parasites that were living on and inside the fishes. Exploring inside their gills and intestines we found tapeworms, lice and even a partially digested fish inside the stomach of another. At the same time, a man and woman spent the day gutting and preparing the fish into fillets after they had removed the gills and intestines for us to study. From our arrival to leaving they did not stop working and eventually scrubbed the blood, mucus and scales from their workbench; leaving several buckets of fish ready to be fried.

As we waited for our tutors to finish preparing a fresh fish dinner we spoke with the Czech students who were planning to stay overnight. Their new plans were to eat fish and listen to their friends play guitar as they spent the night in the Biology Station. We, sadly, had to return to Prague. After all of us had fallen asleep on the long journey home, we finally arrived home to Hostivař Hall with the sun set again, ending a long and strange day full of extraordinary experiences!

Isabel Harris is in her second year studying for a BSc in Applied Biology at Northumbria University. At Charles University, Prague she is studying in the Faculty of Science. She is interested in spreading exciting biology news, reading and music. iForum gave her the chance to travel within the Czech Republic, gain experience of journalism and also see a Charles University orchestra concert. She hopes that anybody would consider doing iForum because it is full of opportunity!