TURNING POINT
Anja Rammig

Ecosystem modeller Anja Rammig started in June as an assistant professor at Germany's Technical University of Munich (TUM), which in 2012 adopted a tenure-track scheme.

Was there a pivotal moment in your career?
I was working on my undergraduate degree in zoology, and I was so excited to learn it was possible to do computer simulations of ecosystems that I almost changed my course of study. My adviser suggested that instead, I pursue a PhD thesis focused on computer modelling. It was the most important move in my scientific life.

How did you come to specialize in forests?
During my PhD programme at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, I worked with researchers at the Institute for Snow and Avalanche Research. Switzerland uses forests as avalanche protection, and researchers had collected data after a strong windstorm in 1990 that had killed many trees in the country. They wanted to learn how long it would take for the forest to regenerate. It was my first experience with modelling, and it convinced me that I wanted to continue this type of work but with a focus on global problems.

What was your seven-year experience at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK) in Germany like?
Working at this world-renowned institute was my introduction to the big world of science policy. In the first month, I began estimating the large-scale die-off of the Amazon rainforest as a result of climate change. I gave presentations at the World Bank and other organizations.

Did you get any coaching on communication?
I had discussions with colleagues about how to communicate the science, but I got no specific coaching. For me, science communication was very new, and in my first two years at PIK, it was difficult to do. But I learned what audiences expected and what level of information worked best. It was the culture of the institute to learn by watching more-experienced colleagues. I determined that it is really important to read a lot to prepare for questions from scientists, stakeholders or politicians — and to know the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports almost by heart.

How is it being a woman in such a male-dominated field?
PIK was trying to increase the number of women in high positions; they were very fair when it came to parental leave and work–life balance. I was in the group at PIK with the highest percentage of women, incidence of maternity leave and employees with children. My last three years there, I had a female boss and worked with five other women. Last year, I applied for a position in Germany that aimed to attract female applicants. I was pregnant at the time, and the date for my presentation was my due date. Ironically, they wouldn't move my presentation date, so they didn't consider me.

Can you describe TUM's tenure-track scheme?
The criteria for how you will be evaluated — on research, teaching and public engagement — are clearly spelled out. Research criteria include developing methodologies and concepts, securing external funding and showing that you are building an international reputation. It's not like the impression you may get at other institutions: that is, that the process is not transparent or lacks defined criteria. Tenure-track professorships in all disciplines have all the same criteria.

What landed you the position at TUM?
I really wanted my own research group to keep studying the Amazon's ecophysiology and how it might change. I'm interested in modelling it with data from experimental studies. Fortunately, while I was at PIK, I established a huge network of collaborations and connections, especially with Brazilian scientists. I am on the scientific committee of a large collaboration to build a big experiment in the Amazon rainforest that will test the impact of increasing carbon dioxide. I think my connections helped me, even though competition for the job at TUM was high. ■

INTERVIEW BY VIRGINIA GEWIN

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.