

[You win some , you lose some]



An experiment that goes wrong, an error in your model, a rejected article: in academia such things tend to be labelled failures. As for talking about failure? Not done! But that's just what WUR co-workers do in this regular feature 'You win some, you lose some'. Because failure can be useful. In this instalment, we hear from Erik Poelman, association professor of Entomology. Illustration Stijn Schreven

'When I was nearing graduation, I applied for a grant to do research on poison dart frogs. I wanted to do the research in the Entomology department. I was convinced that that could work, but the review committee questioned whether the proposed study belonged in that department. The reviewers praised the proposal but I didn't get the Dutch Research Council grant. As a young researcher, I didn't realize how competitive these applications were and what the jury looks for.

'I was terribly disappointed, but it didn't feel like failure to me. In science, more things don't

'In science, more things don't work out than do'

work out than do; that's all part of the game. Failure is too strong a word for it. My dream was to work on frogs, but I had defined the context within which I wanted to do so and that didn't go my way. I wanted to work in the

Netherlands, because I feel at home here and I am close to my family. That limited my options, but those core values were more important to me than any scientific career. And they still are. 'After that rejection, I realized that it was primarily the questions about evolution that fascinated me, and which organism I studied didn't really matter. So I started to focus on insects and plants and then Entomology was the right place for me and I did get a grant. It might not be what I had envisaged, but I am just as able to use my creativity and enjoy myself here.

'In addition to the plant and insect work during my PhD research, I did two lots of field-work in Ecuador working on poison dart frogs. I couldn't let go of the frogs completely and I still keep some at home in terraria, as a hobby. So they have become part of who I am in a different way.' ss

