

[Live&Learn]

A failed experiment, a rejected article: in science, such things are soon labelled failures. As for talking about them – not done! But that’s just what WUR colleagues do in this regular feature. Because failure has its uses. This time we hear from Helen Esser, associate professor in the Wildlife Ecology & Conservation Group.

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‘I have dreamed of doing fieldwork in the tropics ever since I was a child. I finally got the chance to do so for my Master’s thesis in Panama on the effects of over-hunting agoutis (a kind of large guinea pig) on seed dispersal. Without agoutis, the seeds stay on the ground below the mother tree and not many

You feel so miserable you cry

of them survive. In order to find out how many seeds got left under the tree and what they died of, I dug out patches of one square metre. That proved to be very hard work: it was the dry season and the soil was like concrete.

I did that work for three months, spending all day on my own, digging away. It was terrible and I ended up in an existential crisis: this was supposed to be what I had wanted all my life, but I certainly didn’t want to be doing this for the rest of my career. But I persevered. I wanted to come

home with worthwhile results. Later, more experienced field biologists told me I was crazy to keep at it. That cheered me up: maybe it was just this type of fieldwork that wasn’t for me. Instead of feeling a failure, I began to feel proud of myself for getting it done. I decided to do another Master’s thesis in the same country, but this time with my partner, who was doing his internship there. We sailed from island to island in the Panama Canal, setting camera traps and collecting ticks. It was fantastic. It was tough too, but this time the work was varied and I was not alone.

So I found out that that I can be persevering. And that it isn’t always you: fieldwork in the tropics is just tough going. I always tell my own students: there will be disappointments and moments when you feel so miserable you cry. But also moments of enjoying the rainforest. I still enjoy going on a fieldwork trip.’

