

# Classic WUR man gets chair at Utrecht

The ecologist Patrick Jansen studied and worked in Wageningen and has lived here nearly all his life. Yet as of this month he is a professor in Utrecht. Now he will only be at WUR one day a week as a guest professor. Text Roelof Kleis

Jansen never managed to get a position as a professor in Wageningen. His own fault, he freely admits. 'In the normal course of things, I should have become a professor three years ago. I have that ambition but never got round to it. In the tenure track system, you need to build up a dossier, jump through various hoops and tick all the boxes. That approach doesn't suit me; it puts my back up immediately. That's just the way I am.' Even so, it was starting to get to him. 'Colleagues around me were being made professors. And a professorship helps when communicating with the outside world, which I do find important.' Then the Utrecht vacancy turned up. 'It was a perfect fit, so I applied,' he says almost apologetically.

The chair name, Wildlife Ecology & Nature Restoration, sounds a lot like WUR's Wildlife Ecology & Conservation. Won't you be encroaching on WUR's territory? 'No, I don't think so. Over the past ten years, all universities have started paying much more attention to nature and the environment. Other universities too have realized that they don't just need to build up fundamental knowledge about nature and the environment but also need to translate that into applications. Scientists want to do useful things with their knowledge.'

## What will be the focus of your chair group?

'The ecology of wild plants and animals and their interactions with humans. I want to see how to apply that knowledge in nature restoration. We are currently living in the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration. The aim is to stop the rapid decline in biodiversity and turn it around into nature restoration. I find the link between ecology and nature recovery very interesting.'

## Not a rival, then?

'No. It's a small group compared to Wildlife Ecology in Wageningen. Interest in all forms of ecology has boomed. Young people are worried about the future and want

to do something about it. So they study ecology. The job prospects are also really good. When I graduated in the 1990s, all the ecologists were unemployed. Now employers are recruiting them before they even graduate.'

## Ecologists are in demand when the current government has no interest in nature. Isn't that weird?

'It is. There's no feel for nature in the ideologies of the coalition parties. The notion that we're all part of the same ecosystem requires a certain level of understanding that has virtually disappeared from our modern society. Nature has turned into a mere source of recreation. Technology lets us ignore nature. That's not going to change, even if ten per cent of students study ecology.'



Patrick Jansen: 'The notion that we're all part of the same ecosystem requires a certain level of understanding that has virtually disappeared from our modern society.' ♦ Photo Sven Menschel