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The road to an ERC Starting Grant in Primatology

Alba Motes Rodrigo interviewed Dr. Catherine Hobaiter for Cultured Scene about the process of applying for an ERC grant to fund her work on chimpanzees.

ERC Starting Grants are oriented towards early-career researchers based in the EU who want to move forward in their careers by becoming research leaders. These grants award up to 1.5 million Euros for conducting 5 years of research in any scientific field. In 2018, 277 ERC Starting Grants were awarded for Life science projects. One of this year's grantees is Dr. Catherine Hobaiter, who received funding for a project entitled "Gestural origins: Linguistic Features of pan-African Ape Communication".

Cultured Scene: Could you please tell us briefly about your background and the research you have been conducting so far? What has been your main focus until now?

Catherine Hobaiter: My main focus is communication and cognition in wild apes, and in particular gestural communication. My work has explored both types of gestures that apes use and what they use them for. Now we're starting to look across more groups and species of apes.

Was this line of research the same that you had in mind when you first started in primatology? If not, what made you change course?

I first started out looking at baboon behavioural ecology, so the shift to ape gesture was a big one! But I've always been interested in a wide range of behaviour, some of my first papers had nothing to do with my PhD – imitation in chimps, and food processing in gorillas. It can be daunting at times



Dr Hobaite studies gestural communication in great apes

I'm incredibly excited to explore so many new groups of apes. I love working in Budongo, I've been there for over 13-years and I've spent more time with the chimps there than with my friends and family. But at the same time the chance to meet new groups, new individuals, explore new environments is incredibly exciting. Having access to those new data sets isn't just adding more of the same pieces to the puzzle; once we have everything in

trying to dive into a new area, but I feel that to fully understand ape communication we need to understand the world in which they communicate – everything from social relationships to environmental influences.

Congratulations on your ERC Starting Grant! Could you please briefly describe for us what your project is about?

Most of our data so far comes from one or two groups of chimps and bonobos, but in terms of understanding the full potential of ape communication this is like only studying human language in one or two small towns. We need to compare more sites to be able to ask questions like: do chimpanzees have gestural 'accents' or 'dialects'.

We're also finally putting the human apes back in the picture – using similar methods to those typically used with non-human apes, like focal follows and playback experiments, to explore human gestural communication.

What are you most excited about regarding your ERC project? What worries you the most about it?

place we'll be able to see a new picture and use it to ask fundamentally new questions about ape communication.

What was the hardest part of the ERC application process? Do you have any advice for future applicants?

Get as much advice as you can from a wide range of people! Learning how to pitch the writing for the experts in your field (reviewers) but also for experts in other fields (the panel) was tough, and the feedback I got from people who were not ape gesture experts was often the most useful. And reach out to people who've been through it – my colleagues were all incredibly generous and everyone's advice was really useful in preparing me for all sorts of different aspects.

What do you think is the secret for being a successful PI, both work-wise and on a personal level?

I'm not sure I have a good answer for that! But I think getting comfortable with the fact that you don't have to be the expert in everything – sometimes the best thing you can do is be the



Dr Hobaite's primary field site is the Budongo forest in Uganda

matchmaker between the best people and the best projects. And learn to say no to things (because it's in everyone's best interest sometimes for you not to say yes).

What is the most important rule or habit that you have in order to keep a healthy work balance?

I find that hard, particularly when I'm just back from the field. The chimps don't mind if it's Wednesday or Sunday and they're up at 6am everyday, so it's easy to develop bad habits and let those filter into non-field time too. When I'm in Scotland I try to go climbing at least a couple of times a week – it helps that my climbing partner is not an academic, and she doesn't care if it's grant or marking season.

What experience/project/situation has been the highlight of your career in primatology so far?

Habituating the Waibira chimpanzee community in Budongo has been an amazing experience – being present from the first days of field surveys almost 8-years ago, through the days when you were lucky

to get a 5min glimpse of them, to today when you can spend real time with them and start to understand their day-to-day lives.

Do you have any funny/interesting anecdotes of working with primates?

Everyone has their field war-stories they break out over dinner: the time I turned round to find a black cobra sitting up behind me, or seeing a chimp fall flat on his face in the middle of a display because he got his foot stuck in a climber and trying (and failing) hard not to laugh.. It's tough to pick! But one of my most memorable days was in the first weeks of trying to habituate the new chimp group – we'd been working flat out for weeks surveying and were excited to try to track the chimps for once. We heard a group nearby and were making our way slowly towards them feeling pretty smug about how well we were doing without spooking them – we eventually made it all the way to the base of their tree when a chimp swings through just next to us and on her way past looks right at me. I swear we both did a comedy double-take of recognition – it turns out that she was Nora, one of the females from our Sonso group, I'd worked with her right through my PhD but she'd emigrated at the end and we weren't sure where to. Turns out she'd moved just next door! But the feeling that she knew who I was was really poignant. In the end she and the other Sonso girls we found later on became our secret weapon and were a huge factor in helping the group habituate to us much more quickly than we expected. □



Dr. Catherine Hobaite is a primatologist currently lecturing at the School of Psychology and Neuroscience at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. Dr. Hobaite has conducted extensive research on the

evolution of communication and social behavior, including long-term field studies mainly in the Budongo Forest Reserve but also in other African sites.