

Australian Wildlife Society Research Scholarship awarded



Dr Clive Williams presenting Sofietje with her scholarship certificate.

The 2014 Australian Wildlife Society (AWS) Wildlife Ecology Research Scholarship has been awarded to UTS School of the Environment PhD candidate Sofietje Voerman. Given the nature of her project, the scholarship will provide essential extra funding for experimental design and specialised equipment.

“My research focuses on the native marine seaweed *Caulerpa filiformis*, which has become very well adapted and is spreading. The problem with this species is that it is highly chemically defended and structurally very different to other important coastal seaweeds so it has the potential to have wide-ranging effects on the high biodiversity of marine organisms that call these habitats home”, Sofietje said.

“Studying these underwater systems brings many challenges, and one crucial requirement to enabling high quality research is having suitable equipment and diving materials. These can be expensive and often



Caulerpa filiformis covers the rocky reef like a thick and very dense green carpet. Also some habitat-forming kelp (*Ecklonia radiata*) is present. Bronte, Sydney. Photo: Sofietje Voerman.

need to be custom-built, for example sediment traps which will withstand strong ocean currents. This generous scholarship will have a big impact on my research and I hope will lead to a better understanding of Australia's astonishing, yet largely hidden, marine biodiversity", she said.

Head of School, Professor William Gladstone, said that Sofietje was a "passionate advocate for marine conservation and an outstanding young scientist".

Dr Paul Gribben – Sofietje's former principal supervisor now based at Massey University in New Zealand – said the research was very significant because the results would help develop management strategies for our biodiverse coastal ecosystems.

"We live in an era of intense global change, particularly in highly urbanised regions such as Sydney. Sofietje's research is providing valuable insights into how and why species respond to global change", he said.

Sofietje would like to continue her involvement in marine literacy education so that the results of her research reach as broad an audience as possible.

"I am convinced that even a slight increase in understanding will have such a positive effect on every person and creature visiting or living in our coastal systems. My passion is to learn, and share with and inspire others about this almost secret, largely unrecognised but very vulnerable underwater world and the AWS scholarship will help me achieve these goals", she said.

Sofietje was presented with the scholarship at the recent UTS Faculty of Science Annual Prizes Ceremony by Dr Clive Williams, Vice-President, Australian Wildlife Society.

The Wildlife Ecology Science Research Scholarship is aimed at supporting Higher Degree by Research students undertaking research projects with direct relevance to the conservation of Australian native wildlife – flora and fauna. The research scholarship promotes the conservation of Australian wildlife and is open to UTS postgraduate research students to support projects with outcomes that will help conserve Australian native fauna and flora.



Sofietje Voerman working in Bronte in beautiful clear conditions. Photo: Sofietje Voerman.



Dive officer Rochelle Johnston helps out with setting up an experiment in Wollongong. The blue hose connects the air drill to a scuba cylinder. Photo: Frederic Cadera, volunteer.