

A Champion for Fishers

The inaugural MARE Oeuvre Award goes to Rolf Willmann of FAO for his lifelong commitment to the cause of small-scale fishworkers

The Amsterdam-based Centre for Maritime Research (MARE) has bestowed the MARE Oeuvre Award on Rolf Willmann, Senior Fishery Planning Officer, Fisheries and Aquaculture Department, Policy, Economics and Institutions (FIPI), of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) for his lifelong commitment to the cause of small-scale fishworkers.

The award was presented during the 7th People and the Sea conference, held in Amsterdam between 26 and 28 June 2013. The dictionary defines

community, the technology and the conflicts which were brewing at that time—questions very unlike the ones which young ‘experts’ from FAO/UN usually posed.”

The connections Rolf made then with local fisher organizations—those engaged in ‘making a place for small-scale fishing’, which was the theme of the MARE award day—have lasted a lifetime.

Rolf moved to the FAO headquarters in 1982 and has been part of its fisheries division ever since, championing the cause of small-scale fisheries both in global forums and at the grass roots. According to his colleagues in FAO, Rolf has made two major contributions to the development of small-scale fisheries.

First, he has consistently strived to connect the sector with global policy developments as, for instance, those related to the 2012 Rio+20 conference. His efforts towards the Global Conference on Small-scale Fisheries, held in Bangkok in 2008, was part of the realization that larger politics matter. His subsequent attempts to help fructify the International Guidelines on Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries—which will, hopefully, come into effect in 2014—is a logical follow-up of this drive.

Policy processes

Second, Rolf has consistently striven to help representatives of the sector themselves to express their collective voice and to participate in important policy processes. John Kurien elaborates: “Wherever he went, he established contacts with non-governmental organizations and

...he has dedicated his whole professional—and much of his personal—life to the cause of small-scale fisherworkers around the world.

‘oeuvre’ as the total body of work of a writer or artist. Notwithstanding the fact that Rolf is not an artist in the classical sense, he qualifies for the award since he has dedicated his whole professional—and much of his personal—life to the cause of small-scale fisherworkers around the world.

Rolf studied economics in Germany and joined FAO’s Fisheries Division in 1979 as an Associate Expert, based in Chennai, India. John Kurien, founding Member of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), who came to know him soon after, recalls: “Although he was new to fisheries and to India, I was impressed with the nature of the questions that Rolf raised about the fishery, the

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community activists who worked with small-scale fishers. He did not hobnob only with policymakers and officers. Rolf straddled a wide range—from, for example, the World Bank to Bigkis Lakas, a small-scale fisherworkers' union in the Philippines.”

Now, on the eve of an end to a glorious career at FAO, Rolf has been feted by the MARE team who wish to draw attention to, and commend, his important contribution for ‘people and the sea’.

Driven by a sense of cautious optimism, Rolf has not evaded difficult issues and hard choices, and has always chosen to speak out even if his viewpoints are controversial. His style as a team player has stood him in good stead. In awarding Rolf Willmann the Oeuvre Award, MARE is sure that his work will be carried forward by others in the field of small-scale fisheries. 🐟



The MARE Oeuvre Award was given to Rolf Willmann in recognition of his contribution towards small-scale fisheries around the world

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