

Who says Czech scientists have a drinking problem?

Researcher finds that his Bohemian colleagues drink more and publish less

BY JACY MEYER
FOR THE POST

For those of us from the United States, drug and alcohol testing in the workplace is the norm. New arrivals to the Czech Republic may be surprised at the seemingly free-flowing alcohol in the office and the amount of drinking that goes on during lunch and after work.

It's regarded as standard behavior. But one enterprising Czech scientist wondered how drinking in the world's biggest beer-consuming country (per capita) affects his colleagues' work.

"We know that publication success is influenced by a plethora of factors, for example the address of the authors (Oxford vs. Olomouc), the names of the authors, etc.," Tomáš Grim, an associate professor in the Department of Zoology at Palacký University in Olomouc, central Moravia, writes via e-mail. "But we know nothing about the possible effects of the social milieu. I can hardly imagine that social factors would not

affect scientific work."

In 2002, Grim did a brief survey of publication activity by Czech avian ecologists (ornithologists, of which he is one). He found that, from 1980 to 2002, they published a total of 41 papers in international peer-reviewed journals outside the Czech Republic.

On a visit to Paris a couple of months later, Grim met with renowned ornithologist Anders Pape Møller, and asked how it was possible that Møller had published roughly the same number of papers in a year as all Czech ornithologists combined had over two decades.

"It's no surprise when you drink so much beer," Møller responded.

This got Grim wondering whether beer-drinking really does influence the publication output of scientists. His conclusion: Yes, it does!

Grim tested his idea by recruiting Bohemian and Moravian researchers studying avian evolutionary biology and behavioral ecology who had published at least one paper in a peer-reviewed journal outside the Czech Republic in the past 20 years. He asked how many glasses or bottles of beer they drank in a week, and converted that to average consumption in liters per year.

Grim then paired that figure with the number of papers the scientists published, the overall number of citations (when the paper is

cited in other scientists' work) they received and the average number of citations per paper (often used as a measure of a paper's quality.)

His conclusions: First, Bohemians drink more beer than Moravians. A lot more, in fact — about 200 liters a year, compared with the Moravians' measly 37. Second, it affects their productivity, as the numbers also showed the Bohemians publishing fewer papers, eliciting fewer citations and showing a lower citation rate per paper compared with their Moravian counterparts.

A total of 34 scientists participated in the study, which was published in the ecology journal *Oikos* Feb. 8. Though small and tightly focused, Grim feels the sample offers a good representation of how consumption of alcohol can affect a scientist's work.

The response in the scientific community to Grim's report has been encouraging, at least outside the Czech Republic. "I've received several dozen e-mails from around the world — mostly positive ones," he says. "One of them wrote, 'I find your study fascinating because it is so rare to see anyone willing to analyze what probably has the greatest impact on research results: ourselves and our own behavior as researchers.'"

Still, Grim notes one caveat to his findings.

"I should also mention that the results of the study — the more you drink, the less you



COURTESY PHOTO

Grim, left, and a colleague doing some field research on low-alcohol alternatives.

publish — may be based on an opposite cause and effect," he says. "There are two ways to interpret the correlation: You drink, therefore you publish less. Or those who are already

unsuccessful as scientists may drink more to forget."

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