

In the Spotlight: Early career researcher

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Patricia Álvarez-Campos was a PhD Fellow of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and a Postdoctoral Fellow of the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO). She also received Awards from the Society of Systematic Biologists and from the Systematics Association of the Linnean Society of London and, more recently, she has received the Young Research Doctors Award from the Spanish Regional Program of Research and Technological Innovation

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Google scholar page: <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=7kIZdj0AAAAJ>

With whom and where did you study?

I earned my BS in Biology at UAM (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid) working with Guillermo San Martín in taxonomy and systematics of Syllidae marine annelids. I then continued working at UAM with these organisms, completing my PhD thesis in speciation and gene expression patterns with my wonderful advisor Ana Riesgo. Gonzalo Giribet (Harvard University) and Greg Rouse (Scripps Institution of Oceanography) were

also very important mentors during my PhD years since they gave me the opportunity to learn a lot at their labs and to develop part of my thesis goals with them. As a postdoctoral researcher, I began studying the cellular and molecular aspects of annelid regeneration at the Institut Jacques Monod (CNRS, Paris) with Eve Gazave and Michel Vervoort. Once I got the EMBO fellowship I switched to work on single-cell transcriptomics techniques at Oxford Brookes University, mentored by Jordi Solana. Now as an Assistant Professor at UAM, I work on syllids biodiversity and on EvoDevo of different annelid species, specifically on the control of reproduction and regeneration.

What got you interested in biology? when did you know evodevo was for you?

Honestly, I discovered very late that I wanted to be a marine biologist. What I really knew when I was a child was that I wanted to be a professor working in some field related to nature because I loved animals. But since I also loved math, I decided to spend my first year of university studying forestry engineering. A couple of months later, there was enough to realize that my place would not be working on (or teaching about) how to manage natural resources, but instead, it would be learning about the fascinating world of organismic diversity and evolution. Thus, I changed to pursuing a degree in Biology and during my last year, I fell in love with marine invertebrates, specifically mollusks and annelids. Then, I had the opportunity to do my PhD on syllids. I started researching this amazing family of marine worms, that presented (and still present) many unsolved evolutionary questions. My passion for EvoDevo arose very soon, when I began studying the striking type of sexual reproduction that these animals exhibit and when I understood that EvoDevo would be essential to fully comprehend not only reproduction but also other interesting developmental processes such as regeneration.

What is the biggest challenge you face as an early-career researcher?

I guess that the main one would be my own pressure to demonstrate (I'm still wondering to whom) that I am good enough for

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deserving my position at a university. Such a pressure also generates frustration every time you do not get projects or grants; and it is not easy either to manage this feeling. In addition, I think it is also very challenging to find the time to read enough for having good ideas to write good proposals that get funds for my lab. So, working in academia requires having appropriate time management to deal with all the increasing responsibilities (meetings, teaching, coordination of courses, following my students' work while trying to research in my own things...) and administrative tasks (for which I don't even have training); and I guess this is very challenging especially at the beginning. Last but not least, I am also very worried about being a good mentor for my students. I think I am partially influencing what they will do in their future as scientists, and this is a huge responsibility in this competitive world without so many opportunities.

What made you continue in science in an unstable and competitive world?

The number of things you can learn! In science, you are continuously learning not only from your own research, but also you learn from your collaborators, from your students, and from all these scientists that you meet around the world (at conferences, workshops, etc) with such a variety of backgrounds and interests. Furthermore, science can give you the chance to travel around,

visiting different countries for research stays or doing sampling trips to unexplored areas. And of course, no matter what scientific question you have in mind, you can always investigate (and find the experts to work with) to discover the clues to resolve it. In this sense, it is also a very flexible job since you are mainly working for yourself and your ideas. Maybe that is why it is also an exigent job that pushes you to confront many situations out of your comfort zone (new techniques that you don't know, experiments that fail and need a different approach, etc.). But I guess this is also a learning experience, in this case about you and your capacities to resolve whatever you find in your way. In a nutshell, research is the perfect job for the restless person that I am, with a constant necessity for stimulation, and science allows me to totally satisfy my curiosity.

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How to cite this article: Álvarez-Campos, P. (2022). In the Spotlight: Early career researcher. *Journal of Experimental Zoology Part B: Molecular and Developmental Evolution*, 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jez.b.23178>