



## Work-life balance on hold, for the love of science

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**Scientific research in remote areas leaves little room for private life but the attractiveness of such extreme work environment prevails**

It is the end of your working day. And you are ready for a break. But what if there is nowhere to go and family and friends are far away? This is precisely what happens to scientists working in remote locations, such as polar research stations or oceanographic research vessels, or even the international space station. They can hardly escape from work. This lifestyle puts the work/life balance under a lot of pressure. But those involved would not trade such temporary inconvenience for anything as the personal rewards of doing research in extreme environment are also high. Scientists may benefit from this first-hand experience throughout their professional lives.

### Challenging lifestyle

Conducting scientific fieldwork in, say, Antarctica is physically and technically challenging. “Lab scientists can simply go home. We cannot do that,” says Sabrina Heiser, a marine biologist currently working at [Rothera](#), one of the [British Antarctic Survey \(BAS\)](#)’s research stations. It is hardly accessible during austral winter. During periods of bad

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weather in winter, the staff may not be able to conduct fieldwork for three to four weeks, according to Heiser. "This can be very frustrating. It is important to keep up the daily routine and find something useful to work on," she adds.

Scientists in other remote locations, such as the [Zackenberg Research Station](#) in the Northeast Greenland wilderness, experience similar strain. "A normal working day lasts about 14 hours," says Morten Rasch. "There is not very much to do except for working and, maybe, reading a book." Rasch is a senior advisor at the department of geoscience and natural resource management at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. He managed Zackenberg from 1997 to 2012. He also chairs the international Arctic station manager forum [INTERACT](#).

Onboard ships for oceanographic expeditions, the conditions are comparable. "The particular challenge in conducting open ocean research is that you often only have a single opportunity to get things right," says Robert Turnewitsch, principal investigator in marine geochemistry at the [Scottish Association for Marine Science](#) in Oban, UK. "This puts your work under certain pressure," he adds.

### Close-knit community

Working with small isolated communities of researchers force scientists to learn to adapt to their situation. For example, while about 100 people work in the BAS' Rothera station in the summer, only 20 scientists and technical staff stay over in winter. "We work and live closely together. And [we] have to find a way to get along with each other," Heiser points out. But in her experience, serious problems seldom occur. On the contrary: "You make friends for life. Particularly during winter, the team becomes a big family," she notes.

At the other end of the world, on Svalbard, the Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, "scientists share a similar experience. Ny Ålesund is like a small village. You need to be open-minded to integrate into the community. But you also make new friends," says Verena Mohaupt, a physicist who currently manages the French-German polar research base [AWIPEV](#) in Ny Ålesund. There, about 30 scientists and technical staff from different nations operate several research stations during winter.

### Cherished privacy

Despite the support of the close knit community of work colleagues, sometimes the need for privacy and relaxation have to regain their rights in such a demanding work environment. To recover from work, "it is important to find time for yourself," Mohaupt notes. She particularly likes spending her spare time in nature. This is even possible in winter when the sun does not rise over the horizon for about four months, she says. Moreover, "the community is quite active. There are lots of possibilities to relax, such as doing sports," she adds.

Other concur that finding personal time to relax is thus particularly important. "Luckily, there is a lot you can do," Heiser says. For example, there is a library, a music room and a TV room at the station. Each Saturday those working at the station dress up for a more formal dinner. "And you can go skiing, snowboarding or climbing," Heiser adds. However, after having spent two years at the station, Heiser also appreciates having a room of her own during the winter months. This allows her to retreat and keep some privacy. "It is such small things that matter," she points out.

Similar to the better-equipped field stations, ships for seagoing expeditions in fact offer lots of possibilities to relax. "Most of the modern vessels have social rooms, a fitness room or even a swimming pool," says Turnewitsch. In addition, small activities such as informal chats with other researchers, birthday parties or small trips with a boat, break up the daily routine aboard and help relieve this pressure.

### Personal reward

Despite challenging work conditions and the lack of privacy, all scientists regard their work in these extreme environments as particularly rewarding. "You get to see places that others do not have the chance to see," Turnewitsch says. Rasch shares a similar experience. "I am addicted to the Arctic. And I like being in a remote place," he says. Heiser agrees. "Working in Antarctica is a dream job. It is incredibly beautiful here," she says. Heiser will have spent two and a half years in Antarctica when she is finally leaving Rothera in April 2015. She adds: "Then, it is time to return home. Of course, I miss my family and friends. And I am looking forward to warmer weather and to seeing trees again. But I will also greatly miss everything [here at Rothera]."

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As in the case of Heiser, mainly passionate early career scientists nowadays forgo private life to stay for longer time periods at extremely remote places, Rasch points out. "It is often young PhD students who maintain the remote field stations [in the Arctic]. Senior scientists do not have the time," he says. These young people "are extremely happy to work in the Arctic", Rasch adds. "And they can't really understand how fast time flies," he concludes.

### Rebalancing home life

Despite all the attractiveness of fulfilling research goal in some of nature's most spectacular settings, there is a potential backlash. People often get stressed out without noticing after having stayed far from home for more than two months. "Life on these stations is like on a ship. And people can become very homesick and frustrated," Rasch says. This is the reason why the staff usually only stays for two months at such isolated places on Greenland, he explains.

However, when it comes down to balancing family life and field research, "we need to reorganise our daily routine at home," Turnewitsch points out. By contrast, in Rasch's view, as a field researcher "you really get into a dilemma when you get kids." Strolling polar bears are among the reasons why children under the age of 16 are not allowed at remote field stations on Greenland, he points out. Rasch himself was away during summer in most years. This was possible because he has a "very supportive wife", he says. But not until his children had reached an age of 7 and 9 did he realise that he missed important bits of their life. "I had a wake-up call when I got ill one summer and was forced to return home," he says. Since then he has restricted field trips to shorter time periods.

All scientists agree that they need to carefully plan their research and be able to deal with issues arising in such remote work environment in a creative way. But, as Heiser stresses, tackling these challenges and having had the chance to learn to know people in a very particular way have immensely strengthened her. Working and living in Antarctica, she concludes: "has advanced my personality and my professional skills profoundly."

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