

Russian marine biologist commended in EMBO communication award roll

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Dr. Alexander Vershinin of the P.P. Shirshov Institute of Oceanology in Moscow, Russia has been awarded a special discretionary prize as part of the 2005 EMBO Award for Communication in the Life Sciences. The additional award was made in recognition of Vershinin's exceptional work in communicating marine biology to the young, in particular for his *Living Black Sea* education initiative and book on marine science, *Life of the Black Sea*.

Alexander Vershinin is a marine biologist with a difference. Alongside a rich research career, he somehow finds time to run classes at children's summer camps and write books on marine life and ecology. Vershinin has been teaching at summer camps since 1996. Up to 3000 children a year benefit from the ecologist's and fellow instructors' knowledge of the sea, learning everything from biology and genetics to botany and biochemistry.

Most of the teaching takes place at the Federal Children's Centre "Orlyonok", situated on the coast of the Black Sea. Run with a hands-on approach, students are encouraged to discover and learn for themselves. With sandy beaches as the blackboard and the sea as an underwater classroom, the summer schools really capture the imagination of the students and give them a real-life understanding of marine organisms in their natural environment. Vershinin and his colleagues also produce teaching materials for primary and secondary schools and recently launched an educational website, supported in part by funds from the EMBO Small Grants Scheme for Science & Society Initiatives.

Vershinin's book, *Life of the Black Sea*, was also produced with school children in mind, although, since its publication, it has also become popular with researchers. Packed with fascinating colour photos, all taken by Vershinin himself, *Life of the Black Sea* illustrates the full scope of marine life from the biology of marine organisms to environmental problems in the region.

Alexander Vershinin said:

"I'm honoured to receive this award. I hope it will help to bring attention to the urgent need for marine science education in Russia – not only to protect the environment but also to nurture fascination and respect for nature in the young. Environmental awareness can only grow if new generations develop a knowledge and love of nature. Science shouldn't be about boring dusty books, especially the life sciences, which are all around us in life itself. This is what we hope to share with the children we work with and the Black Sea provides the perfect living backdrop."

Alexander Vershinin will receive his award on October 28, 2005 at the EMBO/EMBL Science & Society Conference, "Science and Security", in Heidelberg, Germany.

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