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Interview with Professor Arthur Mol

Professor Arthur Mol from Wageningen University & Research (WUR) will tomorrow receive an honorary doctorate from the Warsaw University of Life Sciences (SGGW). In the interview, he talked about what this title means to him, his cooperation with SGGW, as well as his scientific interests and current research.

Professor, on November 28, you will be awarded the honorary doctorate of the Warsaw University of Life Sciences (SGGW). What does this special distinction mean to you?

Honorary doctorates are the most esteemed recognition that a scientist can receive. This particular distinction holds great significance for me, especially coming from such

a renowned institution as the Warsaw University of Life Sciences. It demonstrates that my work and contributions have been recognized and appreciated by the academic community there, which is truly remarkable. I found the news incredibly exciting and was extremely pleased by it. It’s a profound acknowledgment of my lifetime achievements and the impact I’ve made in my field.

During your tenure as Rector of Wageningen University & Research (WUR) from 2015 to 2024, you played a key role in fostering collaboration with SGGW. What did this cooperation look like, and what were its most significant achievements?

Collaboration with SGGW began even before I assumed the position of Rector at Wageningen University & Research. During my tenure, we not only continued these efforts but also significantly expanded them. Together, we carried out projects within European networks, which brought tangible benefits to both universities. I especially value my close cooperation with Michał Zasada, the current Rector of SGGW, and Marta Mendel, Vice-Rector of SGGW, whose contributions have further strengthened our partnership.

Key achievements included enhancing engineering and agricultural science networks and advancing work within the ICA and ELLS networks, connecting life sciences universities across Europe. As president of ICA, alongside Michał Zasada as vice president, we shaped the network’s mission and fostered collaboration among universities. We also contributed to initiatives like the European Bioeconomy Universities and the European University Alliance, promoting innovative approaches to education and research.

SGGW remains a valued partner for Wageningen, and our collaboration demonstrates the importance of investing in strong academic partnerships to address global challenges. This cooperation has been one of the most fulfilling aspects of my career, highlighting the impact of teamwork and shared vision.

What topics are you currently working on?

I am studying areas such as mining and resource extraction, including fossil fuels, minerals, metals, and phosphate rock. My main research interests focus on the challenges of sustainable development and biodiversity loss resulting from mining activities.

Currently, I am working on a project examining mining on a global scale, which will result in a book publication. In addition, I supervise bachelor’s, master’s, and PhD students conducting research in these areas. While this is a relatively new field for me I find it immensely engaging and full of potential.

A key question driving my research is how to make mining more sustainable. Although often viewed as inherently unsustainable, there are opportunities to improve mining practices and reduce their environmental and social impacts. An equally significant aspect is the relationship between mining and energy transitions, which adds further depth to this research.

I am also exploring the strategic and geopolitical implications of mining, including emerging areas like space mining, deep-sea mining, and polar mining. A critical focus is on how the benefits of these new activities can be equitably shared at a global scale.

In parallel, I am investigating sustainability alternatives, particularly the development of circular systems and improved recycling technologies for materials such as mobile phones, batteries, and other electronic waste. The challenge lies in determining how much we can realistically recover and recycle, which depends on advancements in technology and ensuring cost-effectiveness.

This work is not only intellectually stimulating but also critically important for the future. Mining and its associated challenges are becoming pivotal issues, both strategically and economically, as we navigate the path toward sustainability in a rapidly changing world. I am eager to continue exploring these pressing topics.

Professor, you specialize in areas such as environmental planning, nature conservation, and the philosophy of environmental protection. Why did you choose these particular fields of expertise?

I was born in 1960, and my early years were influenced by significant global events, such as the publication of the *Limits to Growth* report by the Club of Rome in 1972. This report highlighted critical issues: we were overusing resources, polluting the environment, and pushing the planet beyond its capacity to sustain us. As a teenager, I was deeply moved by these findings. It planted a seed in me—a realization that environmental sustainability is not just important but essential. That moment set me on the path I’ve followed ever since.

Initially, I approached environmental issues from a technical perspective. My master’s studies focused on environmental technology, such as purification systems and pollution control equipment. However, as I delved deeper, I realized that solving

environmental challenges isn’t just about technology; it’s also about human behavior and societal structures. This led me to pursue a PhD in sociology, allowing me to combine both perspectives—technical and social. Since then, I’ve described my work broadly as environmental studies, which allows me to explore a wide range of interconnected topics.

I’ve always been drawn to new and emerging areas rather than staying confined to a single subject. Early in my career, I integrated digital science into environmental research, which was groundbreaking at the time. I also believe in observing global trends and adapting strategies accordingly. For me, environmental planning and conservation are about understanding and tackling these complex, global dynamics. It’s this ever-changing, multidisciplinary nature of the work that keeps it endlessly fascinating and deeply fulfilling.

As a scientist, what is most important to you? What is your formula for conducting effective research—research that makes a meaningful contribution to humanity and the world?

Effective research starts with open science—ensuring all data and findings are transparent and accessible. Collaboration is equally crucial. Research should involve partnerships across universities, industries, ministries, and society to address real-world challenges.

It’s also important to balance fundamental research with societal impact, ensuring that studies contribute to solving global issues while remaining widely available. Green universities, like SGGW, excel in this, working collaboratively on major topics within European frameworks and maintaining strong societal connections.

Ultimately, impactful research relies on teamwork, transparency, and a focus on addressing critical societal and environmental needs.

Thank you for the interview.

Interviewed by: Lidia Turska, SGGW Promotion Office

Metryczka

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