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Eckhard von Raab-Straube (1967–2024)

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It was a sunny Tuesday morning, when a phone call informed us that Eckhard von Raab-Straube would not come to work because he had died in a car accident the evening before, on 8 July 2024. That he would never again join us at work seemed unbelievable and left a painful hole in the community of the Botanic Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin (BGBM). His sudden death, in the week before his planned attendance of the Nomenclature Section of the Twentieth International Botanical Congress in Madrid, also tore him from the final preparations for his symposium “Inventorying the plant diversity of the Euro-Mediterranean area: integrating taxonomic progress into dynamic web checklists and electronic floras” at the Madrid Congress and, moreover, from the completion of a paper for the official launch of the new data portal of the Euro+Med PlantBase, an important milestone that he had been working toward in recent years.

Eckhard had been a member of staff at the BGBM since 1997. He was a passionate taxonomist and key pillar of our research programmes in the Euro-Mediterranean region and the Caucasus. With great dedication, he developed the Euro+Med PlantBase to a flagship resource of the institution. At the same time, Eckhard was a field botanist in heart and soul, and the Botanic Garden and Botanical Museum Berlin owes him for many important collections.

Eckhard von Raab-Straube was born on 19 August 1967 in Kiel, the capital city of the German federal state of Schleswig-Holstein on the shore of the Baltic Sea. His mother Silke (1937–2021) was a restorer, painter and conceptual artist, his father Lothar (1933–2015) a jurist and the Lead Prosecutor of the Kiel Public Prosecutor’s



Fig. 1. Eckhard von Raab-Straube on a field trip in Russia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Baksan valley near Chankhoteko in 2019. – Photograph by Gerald Parolly.

Office. Eckhard’s father was a nature lover who knew the names of most trees and wild herbs in the region and also an enthusiastic mushroom picker. Eckhard and his sister Ursula frequently were out with him into nature, and he sparked their interest in nature and plants. Aged 15, Eckhard started to create his own herbarium; his first plant specimen collected on 28 March 1982 was *Hepatica nobilis* from the northern shores of the Westensee near Kiel, now part of the Herbarium Berolinense (B 10 1118659).

Eckhard’s interest in nature and plants persisted and ripened, and in 1990, after graduating from high school, he enrolled at the Freie Universität Berlin to study biology. Focussing on botany and ecology for his diploma thesis, he chose the working group of Professor Wolfgang Frey at the Institute for Systematic Botany and Plant Geography. Eckhard acquired his first scientific merits during a three-month research and collecting trip to southern Anatolia from June to September 1992, together with Peter Hein and Gerald Parolly, to study the then little-

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Fig. 2. Eckhard von Raab-Straube on a field trip in Armenia, at Lake Sevan, 2013. – Photograph by Peter Hein.

known high mountain flora and vegetation of the Taurus Mountains. Eckhard chose the vegetation of wetland sites for his diploma thesis, Peter Hein focused on rock vegetation, and Gerald Parolly worked on scree for his doctoral thesis. Their works were supervised by Professor Harald Kürschner. The trip became a unique adventure with an old, underpowered Bedford CF as mobile base, criss-crossing the Taurus, mostly at altitudes of over 2000 metres and often travelling with tents and pack animals. Snow in the sinkholes and on the summits provided the water, the endemic *Lamiaceae* provided the spices and tea for cooking, and the *Allium* species served as a substitute for onions. Espresso and rakı were served daily at the campfire, which was fuelled by donkey dung and thorny species — the actual camping cooker had given up functioning after just a few weeks with a mighty blaze. Beyond botany, geography and geology, Eckhard also had a keen interest in the local cultures, the local people and current political events. In retrospect, this trip certainly proved formative for Eckhard's future tasks in research and especially at the interface of taxonomy and project coordination, not only in terms of intercultural competence. It is characteristic of Eckhard that he explicitly thanked the “inhabitants of the mountain villages and the yaylas” in his thesis: “Without their warm hospitality and the organization of tractors and pack animals, in many cases it would not have been possible for us to reach the high altitudes of the mountains at all”. His scientific results were impressive: an extensive plant collection preserved in the Herbarium of the Botanic Garden Berlin and vegetation data from 251 phytosociological relevés, numerous vegetation transects, association analyses and field notes, which provided the basis for his 1994 thesis “Die Vegetation der Quell-, Bach- und Schmelzwasserfluren im Westlichen und Mittleren Taurus (Türkei)”, submitted in October 1994 and graded “very good”. The results on chionophytic (meltwater flora) vegetation were published (Kürschner & al. 1998) and still form a cornerstone for

understanding the oro-Mediterranean vegetation of Anatolia today; other data were later contributed to the first synopsis of the high-mountain vegetation. In 1995, Eckhard's results of the 1992 trip were presented at the 4th Plant Life Symposium in İzmir, where he got to know many colleagues who later became important collaborators.

In the 1990s, jobs in botanical science were even rarer than they are today. Work on a freelance basis in the field of environmental planning, consulting and vegetation mapping was a welcome

solution for those with a strong background in floristics and vegetation science, like Eckhard. So, between 1994 and 1997, he contributed to several major environmental impact studies in Berlin and Brandenburg.

During his diploma thesis, Eckhard had spent some time in the Herbarium of the BGBM for comparative studies of the plants collected, and he learned to appreciate this institution and its collections. One of his university teachers was Werner Greuter, Professor in the Department of Biology and Director of the BGBM. Consequently, in search of a suitable topic for a doctoral thesis, Eckhard also approached him. At this time, the long-term *Compositae* systematics focus at the BGBM flourished, with several diploma and doctorate theses under way, and Werner Greuter offered Eckhard either a taxonomic revision in this field or, alternatively, a plant geographic work on the Aegean islands, which would be closer to his previous focus on vegetation science. Eckhard weighed up the pros and cons carefully for several months, as was his way, and finally decided to enter the field of taxonomy. A taxonomic revision of an alpine group of species of the large *Cardueae* genus *Saussurea* appeared to him more rewarding than a phytogeographic subject and, even more importantly, met with his preference for high-mountain environments. So, in 1997, he took up his doctorate project “Taxonomic monograph of *Saussurea* subg. *Amphilaena* (*Compositae*)”, a group of species mainly distributed at the higher altitudes of the mountain chains in western China, and moved into a workplace at the BGBM. A contract by the International Association for Plant Taxonomy (IAPT) for implementation and management of the international database project “Registration of Plant Names” gave him the initial financial support for his doctorate, until registration was removed from the *International Code of Botanical Nomenclature* at the Nomenclature Section of the 16th International Botanical Congress in Saint Louis in 1999 (Raab-Straube 1999). Subsequently, he obtained a two-year grant from the state of Berlin to continue his doctorate.

Eckhard took Chinese language courses at the Freie Universität Berlin from 1999 to 2001, given that much of the relevant literature on his thesis subject and also many herbarium labels were written in Chinese. Also, it was always clear for Eckhard to base his revision on his own collections and the study of species in their natural environment as well as on herbarium material loaned from and studied in herbaria abroad.

For Eckhard's first Sino-German plant collecting expedition in China, he raised funds from the US National Geographic Society and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). In cooperation with Professor Sun Hang from the Kunming Institute of Botany of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Eckhard gathered an extensive collection in the Hengduan Mountains of Yunnan and Sichuan from August to October 2000. In September 2001, he continued collecting in the Dongling Mountain west of Beijing. In July and August 2002, he participated in a Russian-German plant collecting expedition to the South Siberian Altai Mountains to further extend the material basis for his thesis.

At the turn of the millennium, molecular phylogenetics had become part of the range of methods in the taxonomic work at the BGBM, and Eckhard was the first to apply it to the genus *Saussurea*. He provided evidence that the genus was monophyletic only after exclusion of three groups of species that he then recognized as separate genera (Raab-Straube 2003; Wang & al. 2009). In October 2003, Eckhard was also part of a group from the BGBM that went to Munich to deepen their knowledge in a workshop "Theory and practice of computer cladistics" by the zoologist Gerhard Haszprunar and the botanist Susanne Renner. However, the following years saw Eckhard develop in a different scientific direction and so he later concluded his doctorate with a taxonomic revision of *Saussurea* subg. *Amphilaena* (Raab-Straube 2012, 2017) that did not further explore the phylogeny of the genus.

In 2004, Werner Greuter provided Eckhard with the opportunity of a half-time scientific assistance position for two related projects. One was the Euro+Med Project, where he took over the secretariat, which had just moved to Berlin; the other was the Med-Checklist project, where he assisted in the publication of the missing treatment of the large family *Compositae*. What began as another job to finance his doctorate was to change his entire future career. The Med-Checklist, the synonymic checklist of names of vascular plants for the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, had the ambition to be the authoritative plant list for the region by combining an up-to-date and critically evaluated consensus taxonomy with a thorough nomenclatural scrutiny of all names. The Euro+Med project shared the same ambition. Uniting the Flora Europaea and Med-Checklist databases and additional resources, it was intended to build, with the support of a network of contributors and advisors, the Euro+Med PlantBase as an online database and information system for the vascular plants of Europe and the Mediterranean

region. The initial four years' work in these projects, with one of the world's foremost nomenclaturalists, leading up to the completion of the extensive Med-Checklist *Compositae* volume and the publication of the so far available data of the Euro+Med PlantBase, were an intensive training for Eckhard. When the EU-funded Pan-European Species directories Infrastructure (PESI) was set up in 2008, the Euro+Med PlantBase became part of it, and Eckhard was hired again in a half-time position for another three years in this new project. In parallel, he held a further half-time position from 2006 to 2011 in a work package of the EU-funded EDIT (European Distributed Institute of Taxonomy) project. It aimed at the development of the "EDIT Platform for Cybertaxonomy" based on two case studies, Kew's Palm Web Portal and the BGBM's *Cichorieae* Portal (Raab-Straube & al. 2011). Eckhard contributed to the development of the data portal design and acted as co-editor of the monographic *Cichorieae* systematics database (Kilian & al. 2009+).

Besides all this, Eckhard continued the taxonomic work on *Saussurea*. In addition to his thesis, he had taken over with Werner Greuter and Ludwig Martins, the latter at that time also at the BGBM, to co-author the *Cardueae* treatment of the deceased *Compositae* expert Shi Zhu for the Flora of China. Eckhard, being responsible for the *Saussurea* group, had the largest share with 323 of the 440 species treated (Shi & al. 2011).

When the BGBM with Professor Thomas Borsch as its new director decided to create a permanent full-time position from the BGBM's own funds to maintain and further develop the Euro+Med PlantBase after third-party funding had expired, Eckhard, with his wealth of experience and proven expertise in many fields, and after he had finally received his doctorate, was the ideal candidate. Hence, in 2012, Eckhard became Data and Workflow Curator of the BGBM's Euro-Mediterranean focal area of research, and project co-ordinator and administrator of the Euro+Med PlantBase. This was more than just a change from temporary to permanent employment. Following Werner Greuter's decision to place his co-editorship of the European floristic databases in younger hands in order to be able to devote himself entirely to the Flora of Cuba, it was also a move to a position of responsibility in the Euro+Med Project. It found a first meaningful expression in the decision taken together with Thomas Raus to unite the Med-Checklist Notulae with the Euro+Med Notulae, which had served as rapid means for the publication of nomenclatural novelties and new area and status records for either database. Under the joint editorship of Eckhard and Thomas Raus, who had been co-editing the Med-Checklist Notulae over a period of more than 30 years, the first instalment of the Euro+Med-Checklist Notulae appeared in 2013, 17 further instalments by this editorial team followed until early 2025. With great diplomatic skill and collegial empathy, Eckhard cultivated and networked the community of contributors to the Notulae as Corresponding Editor and



Fig. 3. Eckhard von Raab-Straube (centre) on the first meeting of the Flora of Greece project in Athens in May 2017 with Theophanis Constantinidis (left) and Panayotis Dimopoulos (right). – Photograph by Aris Vidalis.

in this function repeatedly solved territorial uncertainties in the Black Sea region and the Levant where unscientific developments threatened to obscure botanical fieldwork. He will also be gratefully remembered especially by the scientific community of the Hellenic Botanical Society as a member of the Scientific-Editorial Committee of the Flora of Greece project from its very start in 2017 (Dimopoulos 2017; Raus 2024).

Eckhard was always committed to the highest standards in data quality. Significantly, when the complete coverage of the Euro+Med PlantBase for all vascular plant taxa in the area was finally reached in 2018, Eckhard, rather than celebrating this, pointed to the percentage of outdated treatments still to be replaced as leftovers from the initial phase of the project (Raab-Straube & al. 2019). Feeling an urgent need to change this, he took over the revision of many taxa himself. The often much underestimated task of keeping such a large database up to date had already prompted its co-founder Vernon Heywood to term it the “Sisyphus project”. Eckhard had much sympathy with this view, he himself seeing it as “the never-ending task for a happy Sisyphos” (Raab-Straube & al. 2019).

The *Compositae*, and the *Cardueae* in particular, continued to be of special interest to Eckhard. On this, his activities included a further collecting trip to China in cooperation with the Kunming Institute of Botany in 2012, further publications on *Saussurea* and other *Cardueae* (Chen & Raab-Straube 2013; Wang & al. 2013; Raab-Straube & Lidén 2020), contributions to the 96th to 98th editions of the Schmeil-Fitschen Flora of Germany, and co-authoring of the phylogeny of the Eurasian genus *Jurinea* as the taxonomic expert and collector of much of the underlying material during three field trips to the Caucasus and one to Kyrgyzstan (Szukala & al. 2019).

An important step was the migration of the Euro+Med PlantBase to a new data portal that makes use of the more advanced architecture of the EDIT Platform for Cyber-taxonomy. This included for Eckhard a phase of thorough, painstaking data-cleaning. During his last years, Eckhard also acted as co-applicant of two successful funding proposals for projects still ongoing. One has been for building national plant diversity data portals for the Caucasus countries Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, as slices of the Euro+Med PlantBase. The other has been for mapping local taxonomies, a task in the framework of the TET-TRIs project (Transforming

European Taxonomy through Training, Research and Innovations). Moreover, he worked on the successful inclusion of the bryophytes in, and the establishing of, a new editorial governance structure for the Euro+Med PlantBase, a comprehensive statistical analysis of its taxonomic and floristic data and, last but not least, on its official launch on the new platform an accompanying paper, originally planned for the second half of 2024 and now close to being completed on Eckhard’s behalf.

Eckhard’s last field trips led him to Vietnam. In the frame of a bilateral project, Vietnamese and German biologists jointly explored the biodiversity of the tropical forests of Vietnam during three collecting campaigns. The Vietnamese colleagues honoured him posthumously by naming the new orchid species *Chiloschista eckhardii* after him (Dang & al. 2024).

Eckhard had a friendly and calm nature, was modest and rather reserved in appearance but attentive, approachable, open-minded and willingly helpful. Eckhard felt a strong bond with the institution and was always open to the concerns of his colleagues. He was also an elected representative on the local staff council of the institution for several years. Being rather deliberate in general, he was not a spokesman in discussions but his contributions were always substantial. He had a strong sense of justice, and the feeling of injustice could upset him more than anything else. He was talented and interested in languages, spoke English, French and Italian fluently, which was of great help in networking, and had a solid basic knowledge of Chinese.

Eckhard loved travelling near and far, with great interest not only in nature but also in landscape, people and culture. He also had a passion for traditional handicrafts;

for instance, he kept a small, old tribal carpet from the semi-nomadic Yörüks of the western central Taurus acquired in 1992 in high esteem for the rest of his life. As nature lover, he was a keen walker, especially in the mountains. Being out in nature and looking for and collecting plants of interest were so inextricably linked that he would never leave his plant press at home, even on just a weekend trip. Being out in nature also was an indispensable counterbalance for the tiring data work. He gladly seized the opportunity to take part in or organize collecting trips and willingly accepted the hardships of the fieldwork in return. Eckhard was the ideal travelling companion: resilient, humorous and, above all, reliable and level-headed in every situation. No matter whether plants were being pressed deep into the night; whether leeches were being flicked off bare legs in mountain pools, or when data and plant collection took place in competition with and in the midst of a herd of goats and sheep, he carried out the work in a Hanseatic, stoic, speedy and absolutely structured manner, spiced up with dry commentary. Even bitten by a bamboo viper in the forests of Vietnam, he did not panic in this dangerous situation. Eckhard loved good food and was particularly fond of Italian, oriental and Chinese cuisine. But no matter what cuisine, it had to be authentic. When Eckhard was once asked if he wanted more sauce during the first pasta we made together on a field party – noodles with tomato sauce – he flinched like the devil before holy water and growled, “Are you also one of those people who drown pasta in sauce?” And with a broad grin: “Until now, I thought you were reasonably civilized...” However, there was one exception when it came to resilience and humour. If Eckhard did not get something good to eat regularly, the fun and patience were over: his tendency toward being hungry was pronounced. He also loved films and the cinema. For many years, the annual Berlinale was a time he took holidays to watch as many films as he could. He liked listening to music, classical music especially, and played the piano. His interests were wide-ranging and one would never have heard of him not being interested in something. His broad knowledge and interests made him a pleasant conversation partner.

Having lived as a single for some time, Liang Jingfei became his life companion after they had met in 2016. They grew with each other and confidence and self-assurance grew in them. They also enjoyed the intellectual debate and when Jingfei was finishing her dissertation, Eckhard was keen to read the linguistic literature to discuss relevant topics with her. They had planned to get married later in 2024.

After his funeral at the Cemetery in Berlin-Steglitz on 19 August 2024, which would have been his 57th birthday, the mourning community of relatives, friends and colleagues met at the Dahlem entrance of the Botanic Garden for a walk together through the garden to a gathering in his memory at the Engler-Pavillon. Eckhard is deeply missed by his family, his friends, and his colleagues near and far, and his spirit will live on

in the BGBM community and in its legacy project, the Euro+Med PlantBase, which the BGBM will continue at the level of quality Eckhard had envisioned.

Memberships held by Eckhard von Raab-Straube

Botanischer Verein für Berlin und Brandenburg gegr. 1859 e.V. (BVBB)
 Gesellschaft für Biologische Systematik (GfBS)
 Gesellschaft zur Erforschung der Flora Deutschlands e.V. (GEFD)
 International Association for Plant Taxonomy (IAPT)
 Organization for the Phyto-Taxonomic Investigation of the Mediterranean Area (OPTIMA)

Publications by Eckhard von Raab-Straube

1997

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1998

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2003

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2004

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