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A Desert Explorer in Silicon Valley

Stefan Kröpelin was invited to Google's and Nature's legendary Sci Foo Camp 2013 and liked it

The University of Cologne's renowned Sahara explorer and geologist was honoured by an unexpected invitation: He was a guest at the Sci Foo Camp in Google's headquarter in Mountain View, California, in June 2013. The annual conference was hosted by Google, Nature, O'Reilly and Digital Science along with 250 chosen academics, artists, managers and decision-makers. In a relaxed atmosphere due to its casual "un-conference" concept, Kröpelin found an exchange of ideas that is still exiting him.



Dr. Stefan Kröpelin was a guest at the Sci Foo Camp in Google's headquarter in Mountain View, California, in June 2013 (testing here a prototype of the Google Glass wearable computer)

Stefan Kröpelin is enthusiastic about the get-together that has been called the "Woodstock of the Mind": "It was an unbelievable event, so enthralling, so inspiring and I will never forget it." The much-travelled scientist had participated in many conferences before but said: "I have never attended a meeting with such a diversity of highly interesting and open-minded people ranging from young inventors to Noble Prize laureates".

Discussion without boundaries

"As a desert specialist, my area of expertise was quite unusual amongst all these physicists, geneticists, biochemists, economists, computer engineers and spaceflight experts," says Kröpelin. "To my knowledge, I also was the only participant from Germany." Some 100 futuristic and innovative topics dominated the sessions in which small interdisciplinary working groups discussed issues such as how to feed the world's population of 9 billion or which technologies might shape the 21st century. His own presentation was entitled "Miracle of the Sahara: Africa's most detailed climate record of the past 11,000 years ... and some more discoveries in the Earth's least explored desert." The Cologne scientist was thrilled by the variety of subjects and the inspiring conversations that went on during meals and into the night. "Such an event is greatly enriching in modern science which is usually slanted towards blinkered expert knowledge."

Conversation with Larry Page

Even Google's co-founder and CEO Larry Page attended the Sci Foo Camp. "I thought he wouldn't come" says

Kröpelin "and that his name was just put on the list to attract people." However, he was not only present but also open to conversation with the participants. "A very sympathetic world star—called by some the Thomas Edison of our time—with a modest appearance," says the desert explorer. "He was standing there in jeans and sneakers and talking to the participants." A chance for Stefan Kröpelin to tell him about his research in the Sahara and to show him a piece of the enigmatic "Libyan desert silica glass" which is scarcer than diamond and also decorates the pectoral of Pharaoh Tutankhamun. Weighing it in his hands billionaire Page said it was "priceless".

The surface of Mars on Earth

The meeting provided Kröpelin with an opportunity to get in touch with scientists from remote fields of research such as to members of the US Mars projects. "There are many links to our geoscientific fieldwork in the eastern Sahara which is the Earth's best analogue to the surface of Mars." The German desert geologist who is acknowledged for his palaeoclimatic research in the remote Sahara of Northern Chad suggested a cooperation-project with NASA: "In 1978, a pioneer NASA expedition surveyed remote parts of the Egyptian Sahara to gain a better understanding of the surface of Mars. That's now 35 years ago during which time a wealth of new data has been generated by the numerous Mars missions and on the ground. We should mount a memorial event together."

Kröpelin's only criticism is that the meeting was too short. "I wish there had been more time to exchange thoughts and ideas in this unique congregation of distinguished academics from the world's leading universities and institutions." In any case, the conference was a success for the Cologne scientist. Kröpelin has remained in contact with some of his new scientific fellows and is thinking about novel projects he can cooperate with them on. Moreover, he has been invited to San Francisco to hold Google and LongNow lectures in 2014.

2paragraphs.com/2013/07/the-sahara-saffo-cheers-stefan-kropelins-miracle/

www.edge.org/event/ask-a-scifoo-question

longnow.org/seminars/02014/jun/10/civilizations-mysterious-desert-cradle-rediscovering-deep-sahara/

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Anreise & Lagepläne



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