

MEDIA RELEASE

16 May 2018

Drones collecting whale snot and poking plants to stop disease win FameLab national titles

Congratulations to Vanessa Pirotta from Macquarie University Marine Predator Research Group, whose brilliant tale of using drones to collect whale snot was declared winner of FameLab Australia 2018 at a sparkling event on Thursday 10 May.

Vanessa will now go on to represent Australia at the international FameLab competition at the Cheltenham Science Festival in June, competing against scientists from around 30 countries.

Vanessa's research project investigates use of drones to collect health information from free swimming whales. Collection of whale blow is done via a custom-built drone. Previous health information from whales came from those that stranded, or were deliberately killed. More recent methods involve close boat approaches using a pole. Vanessa's research is transforming the way scientists collect health information from whales.

"The FameLab journey has helped me develop my science communication skills. I thoroughly enjoyed presenting my research to school students and learning from some of the best science communicators such as Malcolm Love and Alan Duffy. Winning the national FameLab final is a true honour. I now have the opportunity to represent Australia on the world stage and talk about whale snot" says Vanessa.



FameLab 2018 Australian winners (L to R)
Muthu Vignesh Vellayappan Audience Choice Winner
Vanessa Pirotta FameLab National Winner
Toby Hendy FameLab National Runner-Up

The Runner-up, Toby Hendy from the Australian National University, pokes plants with needles to mimic the way a pathogen would pierce through a plant cell to spread disease. She has found a new minimum pressure that can trigger a defence response in the plant; stiffening the cell wall. She works on the coffee crop which is a species at risk of disease infection.

The Audience Choice winner, Muthu Vignesh Vellayappan from Monash University, is designing more effective heart patches to save heart patients. Heart muscle cells don't efficiently align on some patches, leading to poor healing. Muthu's research uses 3D printing and post-processing techniques to produce more effective grooved cardiac patch material.

"We are thrilled that Vanessa Pirotta will bring the innovation of Australian marine science to a global stage. British and Australian scientists have always worked closely together, with over 6000 joint papers published, and we are delighted that Vanessa's work will now have this international exposure. The diversity of talent and exploration in this country is astounding, and we thank all the FameLab finalists for reminding us what a fascinating world we live in," Helen Salmon, Director British Council in Australia commented.

The national final was hosted by Prof Alan Duffy and the judges were Helen Salmon (Director British Council in Australia), ABC's Robyn Williams and Lyn Beazley AO at the Octagon Theatre, University of Western Australia, Perth.

Distinguished guests included

British High Commissioner to Australia Her Excellency Menna Rawlings CBE

Vice Chancellor, University of Western Australia Prof Dawn Freshwater

Member for Armadale, Western Australia Dr Tony Buti MLA

Nobel Prize Laureate Barry James Marshall, AC, FRACP, FRS, FAA

Barrister and former Governor of Western Australia Malcolm McCusker AC, CVO, QC, CitWA

Alec Coles OBE, CEO of Western Australian Museum

WINNER: Vanessa Pirotta, Macquarie University

RUNNER UP: Toby Hendy, Australian National University

AUDIENCE'S CHOICE: Muthu Vignesh Vellayappan, Monash University

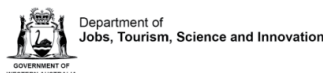
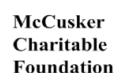
The scientists are available for interview. Photographs are available at

<https://www.flickr.com/gp/britishcouncilaustralia/C89kCc>

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FameLab 2018 is presented by the British Council and Cheltenham Festivals | Founding partners: Western Australian Museum and The McCusker Charitable Foundation | Major partner: Woodside Energy Ltd | University partners: Curtin University, Edith Cowan University, Murdoch University, University of Technology Sydney and University of Western Australia | Venue partners: Museum of Applied Arts & Sciences, Queensland Museum, Museums Victoria, Western Australian Museum and Western Australian Museum Foundation | QLD presenting partner: World Science Festival, Brisbane | WA presenting partner: the Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science & Innovation | UK Government partner: British High Commission | Media partner: Australia's Science Channel | Training and advocacy partner: Inspiring Australia



Notes to editors:

FameLab® is a competition owned and created by Cheltenham Festivals in the UK. The British Council has license to deliver the competition in over 30 countries overseas. Since its birth at the Festival in 2005, FameLab has grown into the world's leading science communication competition. A partnership with the British Council since 2007 has seen the competition go global with more than 9000 young scientists and engineers participating to date.

About the British Council

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We work with over 100 countries in the fields of arts and culture, English language, education and civil society. Last year we reached over 65 million people directly and 731 million people overall including online, broadcasts and publications. We make a positive contribution to the countries we work with – changing lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust. Founded in 1934 we are a UK charity governed by Royal Charter and a UK public body. We receive 15 per cent core funding grant from the UK government. www.britishcouncil.org

