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Press release

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“Rheines Wasser“: Extreme sport, scientific experiments and environmental protection all in one

Furtwangen University (HFU) professor swims Rhine from source to estuary to test water quality

“Yes, I am a bit crazy,” laughs Andreas Fath a Furtwangen University Professor of Physical and Analytical Chemistry specializing in Ecological Engineering. And maybe he is, because this summer the chemist plans to swim the Rhine from source to estuary - something that until now only the Bonn swimmer Klaus Pechstein has achieved. And that was back in 1969. The Swiss swimmer Ernst Bromeis was forced to abandon his 2012 attempt.

Double Challenge

Professor Fath, who began his successful competitive long-distance swimming career in the 1980s and in 2012 became the German Masters Champion in his age group, has been preparing for the Rhine attempt intensively for the last year. But, as the name of the project, “Rheines Wasser”, implies, the sporting challenge is not actually the most important thing for him. “As a long-distance swimmer, I am passionate about water which also explains my interest as a scientist,” he explains. “Of course, the river will test me, but I’m going to test the river, too. I’m interested in how good the quality of the water all along the Rhine is, between the Alps and the North Sea.”

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Raise Awareness For Effective Water Protection

The event also aims to use the high level of public interest to raise awareness for the importance of water as a resource and the need for increased water protection. Andreas Fath will test the Rhine all along the 1,231 metres of the river - something that has never been done before.

A scientific team consisting of students from Furtwangen University and partners from the Water Technology Centre in Karlsruhe, the Alfred Wegener Institute in Helgoland, the University of Bayreuth, the Swiss aquatic research institute EAWAG, and the Dutch centre of excellence for sustainable water technology Wetsus, will be supporting Andreas Fath. The water samples taken during the swim every day will be tested for industrial chemicals, hormones, anti-depressants, sweeteners, antibiotics, painkillers, drugs, pathogens and microplastics, among other substances. The project team will also measure current speed, pH values, conductivity and the temperature of the water. "We expect to collect a great deal of new scientific data," explains Andreas Fath, "For example, regarding the level of microplastics' pollution in the Rhine between the source and the North Sea." But they will also be looking at where water quality has improved in the last few years. "My real goal in the long run, after we have analyzed the results of the Rhine measurements and determined the source of the pollutants, is to develop systems and processes which remove these substances before they even reach the water. The same way I've already managed to do with a filtering process for perfluorinated tensides," says Fath.

Initial Research Results at Hansgrohe Water Symposium

Initial rapid test results of the Rhine measurements will be presented by Andreas Fath and the project team during the swim. Detailed research results will be published by the chemistry professor at the "7th Hansgrohe Water Symposium"

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which the main sponsor of the project, Hansgrohe SE, will be hosting on 13 November, 2014 in Schiltach in the Black Forest.

Follow the Swim Live and Online

Those who are interested can follow the starting preparations and the progress of the project online from the beginning of July 2014 at www.rheines-wasser.eu. They can also follow the integrated "Rheines Wasser" blog set up and written by HFU students. "We hope people will be interested and will support us by following our project live along the Rhine. And of course we'll be happy to meet them at the stops along the way," says Andreas Fath. But he warns people expressly not to try to copy him or swim with him. "The Rhine has a very powerful current which is extremely dangerous even for experienced swimmers. Please don't try to swim with me. It's much better if you just cheer me on from the riverbank."

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„Rheines Wasser“ – Partners

