

WorldFish Center bids farewell to longest serving Director General

It will soon be time to bid farewell to Dr Meryl J. Williams who has been the Director General of the WorldFish Center since April 1994. Dr Williams will depart after serving the maximum term of 10 years as Director General of the Center. She is the longest serving Director General in the Center's 27-year history (Table 1).

Dr Williams' term coincided with a very significant period in the recognition of the importance of fisheries and aquatic resources and in the development of the Center after its entry into the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) in 1992. The period began in light of the first Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and also saw the culmination of the second Earth Summit (the World Summit on Sustainable Development – WSSD) at Johannesburg in 2002. The WSSD Plan of Implementation fully recognized the urgency of restoring fisheries resources and set a key timetable to achieve this¹. In 1996, noting the far-reaching impacts that worldwide changes wrought on people in developing countries relying on aquatic resources, Dr Williams highlighted the major transition in the contribution of these resources to sustainable food security².

To address the transitional challenges, Dr Williams helped spur the growth and revitalization of the WorldFish Center by encouraging a balanced institutional approach. This article highlights the Center's approach during this exciting period, describing directions and initiatives with which she is proud to have been associated. Dr Williams does not take credit for any of these, but pays tribute to WorldFish partners, donors,



staff members and Trustees from around the world for making the difference.

During the last 10 years, the directions of the research program of the Center have become more multi-disciplinary, especially with the addition of a strong policy research program and a biodiversity element. Although WorldFish had always had a mandate for multi-disciplinary work and even fostered some ground-breaking studies in its early days³, its focus on the sociological and economic aspect was limited, as was the case with most other aquatic resource research agencies at that time. In the early 1990s, research agencies were focusing on biological and technology research to the exclusion of the sociological issues. Today the social, economic, governance, and policy dimensions of fisheries issues are central to WorldFish - as is appropriate for a research agency addressing poverty, livelihood and food security.

This was engineered by creating a new Policy Research and Impact Assessment Program in 1996. This Program is now the largest of the four research programs at WorldFish.

Aquatic biodiversity studies were also given more emphasis as a consequence of the signing of the Convention on Biological Diversity. WorldFish now boasts a unique Biodiversity and Genetic Resources Research Program that covers the spectrum of biodiversity issues, from the science of conserving natural aquatic biodiversity to selective breeding for aquaculture and the biosafety of new fish strains.

During Dr Williams' term, WorldFish attracted additional funding and expanded the geographical scope of its activities. In Africa, it accepted the offer of the Government of Egypt and took over a large freshwater aquaculture research facility to establish a regional research center for Africa and West Asia. In the Asia-Pacific, the Center's work focused more on the poverty hot-spots of South Asia and the Mekong region. Projects were established in the Caribbean and are being planned for Latin America.

In 2000, the WorldFish Center moved its global headquarters from rented offices in Manila, Philippines, to Penang, Malaysia. On land and infrastructure provided by the Government of Malaysia, the Center built a modern new campus. Some programs are still conducted out of the Philippines, from offices now located at the headquarters of the International Rice Research Institute in Los Baños, Laguna.

Partnerships were another driving

¹ See: http://www.fishforall.org/wssd/wssd_plan.asp for details.

² Williams, M. J. 1996. The transition in the contribution of living aquatic resources to food security. International Food Policy Research Institute: Food Agriculture and the Environment Discussion Paper No. 13 (April 1996), 41 p.; *Ibid.*, The transition in the contribution of living aquatic resources to sustainable food security, p. 1-58. In S.S. De Silva (ed.) Perspectives in Asian fisheries. Asian Fisheries Society, Manila, Philippines. (Special 10th Anniversary publication of the Asian Fisheries Society.)

³ See Scientific Highlights of a Quarter of a Century in the 2002 Annual Report.

Table 1. WorldFish Center Director Generals

Center Director: Dr Philip Helfrich (USA)	January 1975 – November 1976
Director General: Dr John C. Marr (USA)	November 1976 – March 1979
Director General: Dr Ziad H. Shehadi (Lebanon)	July 1979 – January 1982
Acting Director General: Dr James C. Johnston (USA) (also Board Chair)	January – October 1982
Director General: Dr Richard A. Neal (USA)	November 1982 – March 1985
Director General: Dr Ian R. Smith (USA)	June 1985 until his untimely death on 31 October 1989
Acting Director General: due to the serious illness of Dr Ian R. Smith (Director General), Mr Jay L. Maclean (Australia) appointed Acting Director General	November 1988 – April 1991
Director General: Dr Kenneth T. MacKay (Canada)	April 1991 – April 1993
Interim Director General: Dr Larry D. Stifel (USA)	July 1993 – April 1994
Director General: Dr Meryl J. Williams (Australia)	April 1994 – April 2004
Director General designate: Dr Stephen Hall (UK)	March 2004 -

force in positioning WorldFish to make greater contributions. Since the WorldFish Center joined the CGIAR in 1992, the number, diversity and strength of its partnerships has enabled it to better understand the needs of its beneficiaries and facilitate improved research performance and delivery (see box). Guided by a formal Partnership Policy adopted in 1996, WorldFish emphasizes complementary linkages with national research systems, regional and international bodies, non-governmental and community agencies and the private sector. An example of a unique partnership created by WorldFish, governmental agencies and private sector agencies is the non-profit, non-stock GIFT Foundation International Inc. in the Philippines. This was created to continue the success of the GIFT project in developing a fast-growing breed of tilapia and to ensure that the new breed is widely available to farmers. Dr Williams has chaired the Board of the Foundation since its inception in 1997. The Center is participating with nearly 300 program partners. In addition, over 30 donors support WorldFish and its field personnel are hosted by nine developing countries. Twenty-five countries are now implementing projects jointly with WorldFish.

Several highly visible initiatives were developed during Dr Williams' term. Two examples are: the new public name (WorldFish Center) and image of the Center; and the launch of the *Fish for All* initiative. Both initiatives were undertaken to bring fish issues into clearer focus within the mandate of the CGIAR and in the global community.

Both the catchy name and trendy image of WorldFish have already led one other CGIAR Center, the World Agroforestry Center (formerly ICRAF), to simplify and clarify its own public image.

To ensure that fish issues, in all their complexity, are given importance by a wider constituency and are adequately addressed, Dr Williams played an instrumental role in establishing and launching the *Fish for All* initiative in November 2002. This 10-year initiative offers an excellent opportunity to forge long-term partnerships amongst all types of stakeholders. Through meaningful dialogue and multi-sectoral interactions, often on a national scale, it is expected that viable and flexible policies will emerge on such topics as fish and development, fish and nutrition, health, livelihoods, gender, trade, economic growth, etc. The *Fish for All* initiative won the CGIAR Science Award in October 2003.

The WorldFish Center convenes high profile events and has a well-respected publications series with nearly 1 700 publications. Its conference and publication products are well received in both developing as well as developed countries. Dr Williams has added to the wealth of information by submitting over 80 articles on tropical fisheries and aquaculture to international scientific and development journals, including those produced by WorldFish.

Through her catalytic role at the helm of WorldFish, Dr Williams has spearheaded several international conferences, workshops and symposia, with a wide dissemination of their proceedings and

declarations. For example, on behalf of the Asian Fisheries Society, she was co-convenor of the Asian Women in Fisheries Symposium held in Chiangmai, Thailand in 1998. In 2001, she took the lead at the Global Women in Fisheries Symposium conducted in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. She also fostered the Kaohsiung Declaration of the Society to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the first that the Asian Fisheries Society has published.

The internal organizational development of WorldFish saw many changes during Dr Williams' term, all aimed at creating a strong and strategic agency, capable of operating efficiently and effectively in a challenging international environment. An executive management team was formed in 1996, consisting of the Deputy Director General for Research Programs, Associate Director General for Corporate Services, Assistant Director General for International Relations and Partnerships, Deputy Director General for Africa and West Asia, and the Director General. Improved financial, staff and infrastructure management policies and processes were introduced in a comprehensive process of institution building, under the strong supervision of the Board of Trustees. Over the last 10 years, the Board was led, successively, by the late Professor John L. Dillon, Professor Kurt Peters, and Professor Robert E. Kearney (current Board Chair). WorldFish conducts a regular staff opinion survey across all its sites and uses the confidential results obtained to improve its internal communications, staff consultations and operations.

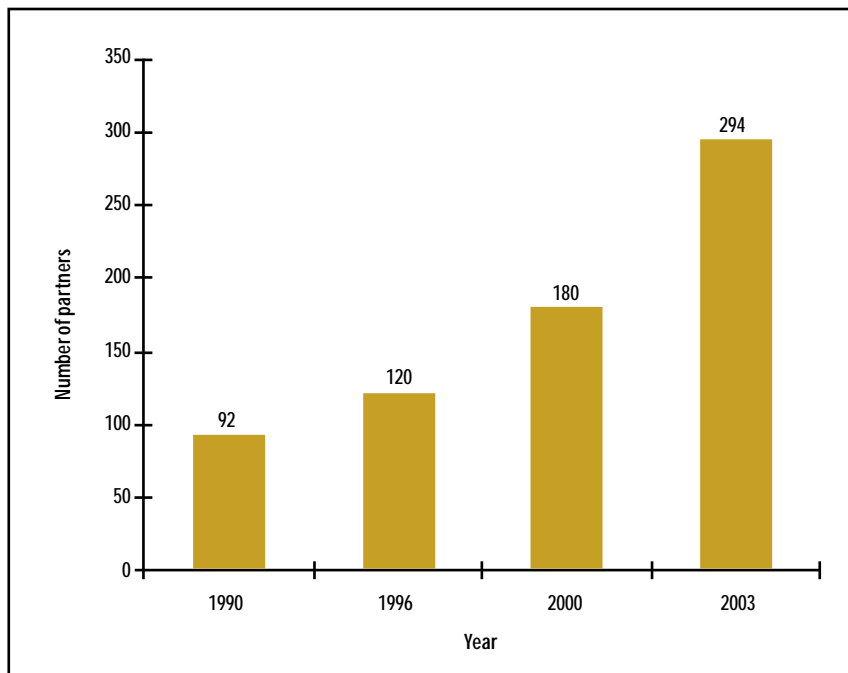


Fig. 1. Increase in the number of partners, 1990-2003

Another important feature of the last decade has been the integration of the WorldFish Center into and its contribution to the CGIAR System, an international alliance of 63 members (countries, multilateral aid agencies and foundations) supporting 15 international research centers. The Center benefited from access to the expertise and processes of the larger System, and from the prestige of gaining entry. WorldFish has also made a significant contribution to the System, bringing knowledge of aquatic resources into its terrestrially based agricultural agenda and supporting many organizational initiatives. Since joining the CGIAR System in 1992, WorldFish has actively participated in cross-Center research programs such as the Systemwide Genetic Resources Program, the Water and Food Challenge Program, and organizational service programs and activities such as the Gender and Diversity Program, and the Internal Audit service, among others.

Dr Williams believed from the start that WorldFish could gain much from being a CGIAR Center and has steered

the Center to be an active contributor. She has also played a prominent role in the System. For instance, she chaired the Advisory Board of the Gender and Diversity Program, the Board of the Association of International Agricultural Research Centers, and was the Center Director's Committee (CDC) representative of the new System Office of the CGIAR. During 2001-2003, she was on the Executive Committee of the CDC and chaired the CDC in 2002.

Dr Williams has also accepted invitations to sit on various external committees associated with the work of WorldFish. To name a few, she has been a member of the FAO Advisory Committee on Fisheries Research since 1997 and is now its chair. Throughout the 1990s, she was active in Australia in various capacities in the effort to find ways to prevent the introduction of exotic invasive species via ship ballast water. Presently, she is on the Steering Committee of DIVERSITAS, the international research program on biodiversity loss and its impacts, and on the Scientific Steering Committee

of the Census of Marine Life. She has also contributed to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and represented the CGIAR on its Board.

Prior to joining WorldFish, Dr Williams was briefly the Director of the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS). She also served as a member of the AIMS Council from 1989 to 1997. She was a member of the first Board of the Australian Fisheries Management Authority and, from 1989 to 1993, was a member of the Council of the Australian Maritime College. Before joining AIMS, Dr Williams was the Executive Director of the former Bureau of Rural Resources in the former Department of Primary Industries and Energy, Canberra, Australia, and conducted fisheries research for the Queensland government and for the South Pacific Commission.

She received her Ph.D. in zoology and a master's degree in literary studies (mathematical statistics) from the University of Queensland. In recognition of her contributions to fisheries and marine science in Australia, Dr Williams was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering in 1993. In 2003 she was awarded the prestigious Australian Centenary Medal in recognition for her outstanding contributions to Marine Science.

From 1 May 2004 Dr Williams will serve as the first Executive Officer of the new Future Harvest Alliance Office, a creation of all the CGIAR Centers to better support their collaborative actions.

In the next phase of her life, she will continue to be involved in a number of other pursuits, including chairing the FAO Advisory Committee on Fisheries Research, and being a member of the Scientific Committee of DIVERSITAS, the International Scientific Steering Committee of the Census of Marine Life, and the Working Group to Promote a Representative System of Marine Protected Areas in the High Seas.