

Indianapolis Zoo

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NEWS RELEASE

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GLOBAL CENTER for SPECIES SURVIVAL

Landmark Project Launched to Study Aquatic Fungi *International consortium explores diversity & conservation of understudied species*

INDIANAPOLIS – Aquatic fungi are hugely important yet understudied. The Indianapolis Zoo’s Global Center for Species Survival hopes to change that by participating in a new landmark project. In partnership with scientists from across Europe, Project FUNACTION (Aquatic FUNgal biodiversity: developing knowledge and strategies to inform Conservation priorities and measures) aims to increase our knowledge of aquatic fungi biodiversity and its conservation in Europe.

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Currently neglected in all major conservation action plans, aquatic fungi play crucial roles in aquatic food webs and ecosystem functioning. Despite being tiny in size, they are the dominant microbial decomposers of litter from terrestrial plants in streams and lakes but also interact with planktonic algae and play many other roles.

Project FUNACTION brings together researchers from Estonia, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland, Portugal and the United States to determine what drives diversity patterns of aquatic fungi and whether aquatic fungi already receive effective protection within Europe’s protected area network. They will also develop protocols for long-term monitoring of aquatic fungi in Europe to promote and ensure sustainable conservation measures.

“Only recently have the funga and inland waters been specifically recognized as primary conservation targets through actions like the formal adoption of the term ‘funga’ to be used along with flora and fauna by the IUCN and other groups, and the inclusion of inland waters within the post-2020 global biodiversity framework adopted at the Convention on Biological Diversity’s 15th Conference of Parties last month,” explains Dr. Jennifer Anderson, the project coordinator based at Uppsala University. “The time is right to incorporate aquatic fungi into conservation planning.”

The network includes members from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to ensure that aquatic fungi are included in conservation decision making – an area where these organisms have so far been overlooked. Consortium members from the IUCN’s Red List, Key Biodiversity Area program and Freshwater program (UK) as well as the Global Center for Species Survival at the Indianapolis Zoo – a partnership with the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) – will support the identification of threats to individual species and highlight additional priority areas for aquatic fungi conservation. They will also help in disseminating information and raising awareness about these important species across Europe and beyond.

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“Aquatic fungi comprise an astonishing functional and taxonomic diversity, most of which is unknown and not understood,” says Dr. Andreas Bruder – Institute of Microbiology, SUPSI, Switzerland – who is part of the FUNACTION team and a member of the IUCN Species Survival Commission where he co-leads the Taskforce on Global Macroinvertebrate Sampling Protocols. “This project will make a big first step to change this and to put this diversity on the European map and into the minds of conservation practitioners.”

“Freshwater biodiversity remains overlooked in the conservation agenda – to our peril! Because of their tiny size, aquatic fungi are out of sight, out of mind, but they punch way above their size in terms of ecosystem importance. Increasing knowledge of these crucial organisms is the first step to increasing our appreciation for them. This is why we are so excited to be part of this team here at the Global Center for Species Survival!” says Dr. Monika Böhm, the Global Center’s Freshwater Conservation Coordinator.

This project is made possible through funding from Biodiversa+, a European co-funded biodiversity partnership supporting excellent research on biodiversity with an impact for policy and society. This project was approved as part of the 2021-2022 call on “Supporting the protection of biodiversity and ecosystems across land and sea,” and aims at supporting three years of transnational research projects. The project officially starts on April 1, 2023.

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About the Global Center for Species Survival

The Indianapolis Zoo’s Global Center for Species Survival is a partnership with the [Species Survival Commission](#) of the [International Union for Conservation of Nature](#). The Global Center supports and connects thousands of conservation experts working to secure a future for animals, fungi and plants in more than 160 countries.

About the Indianapolis Zoo

The Indianapolis Zoo protects nature and inspires people to care for our world. Located in White River State Park downtown, the Indianapolis Zoo is accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and the American Alliance of Museums as a zoo, aquarium and botanical garden. Visit IndianapolisZoo.com.