



Fungi are incredibly important. Plants produce and animals consume, but fungi recycle. Without them, life on this planet could not exist. That's why we study them. That's why we have meetings to communicate our discoveries and discuss what they mean. The Congress of European Mycologists is the world's oldest continuously running series of international meetings about fungi. The first was in 1956 and, up to now, every subsequent Congress has been in a different and new country. The next one – the eighteenth – is different. With it, we return to a country which has already hosted the event. That country is Poland.

The XVIII Congress of European Mycologists will be held from 16-21 September 2019 with two venues. The first is Warsaw. In the historic old town and academic environment of its ancient university we will consider, debate and review the current state of fungal science in Europe and beyond. The second venue is Białowieża. There, in Europe's greatest and most famous primaeval forest, the emphasis will be on fungi in nature.

It is no mere chance that Poland is the first country to welcome a return of our Congress. The Polish Mycological Society is young and vibrant. Its members are passionate about fungi and ardent in studying these remarkable organisms. In their company, we can explore the benefits fungi bring to human life. Those benefits are enormous and wide-ranging, and results from traditional mycology and the new molecular technologies bring more every day. Just one example from the proposed programme highlights that perfectly: the important role of fungi in forensic science – who could have imagined that? We must also, however, consider the harm done by fungi, for example in damaging crops. But our reflections must be intelligent. There is a paradox. The damage done by fungi has a positive side: "harmful" fungi are vital as checks and balances in the complex interactions which make the world's ecosystems. They are like cog-wheels in an old clock, or digital chips in a new one: without them, the clock cannot work.

In keeping with the tradition of our Congresses, fungal conservation will be a major consideration. Conservation is not just about animals and plants. Fungi too are threatened by climate change, exploitation, habitat loss, persecution and pollution. They have no magic charm protecting them from these dangers. If mycologists don't shout about this, who in the conservation movement will remember the fungi? The Poles can be proud that so many of the great pioneers in fungal conservation have come from their country. They need our support to help maintain the impetus of their conservation work in Poland.

Since 2003, all Congresses of European Mycologists have been organized under the auspices of the European Mycological Association. As its President, it is an honour and an enormous pleasure to invite you to participate. And that invitation goes to everyone with an interest in these beautiful and fascinating organisms, not just in Europe, but throughout the world. Like the mycelium they study, mycologists form an invisible but complex and effective network: when you come to this Congress you will be helping to form the fruitbody of our science from which the spores of learning are dispersed.

David Minter on behalf of the European Mycological Association