

Levity and gravity



The Ig Nobel Prize celebrates research that makes us first laugh and then think. We look at some of this year’s not so ignoble highlights.

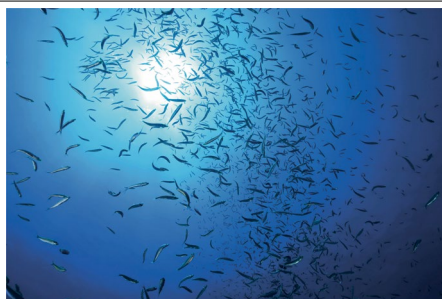
The announcement of the Nobel Prizes in October is unquestionably one of the most anticipated fixtures of the scientific year.

Although the stories of laureates finding out about the high honours bestowed upon them have their charm (Peter Higgs found out when someone told him on the street), the announcement itself is certainly not the most entertaining event. This honour goes to the Ig Nobel Prize, whose winners are announced during its award ceremony in case someone prefers to politely decline when getting the call from a place that is not Stockholm.

The official part of the ceremony where ten Ig Nobel Prizes in different categories are handed out by former Nobel Prize winners is – as described by Amanda Palmer – a “**HILARIOUS and INCREDIBLY DORKY evening and ALWAYS awesome**”. That’s nothing less than you would expect from an event that commences with a traditional Welcome, Welcome Speech, includes some paper airplane throwing, a mini opera, topics that certain people think about in so-called 24/7 lectures (not measured in hours per day as we shall explain below) and closes with a traditional Goodbye, Goodbye Speech.

During this year’s **water-themed 33rd First Annual Ig Nobel Prize ceremony**, each winner received their Ig Nobel Prize (a PDF document that can be printed out and assembled into a box) along with a supersize Zimbabwean ten trillion dollar bill – research funding issues are now water under the bridge.

Some of the prizes were awarded for research somewhat related to water. Geologist Jan Zalasiewicz, winner of the chemistry and geology prize “**for explaining why many scientists like to lick rocks**”, explained that



by wetting the surface of a rock, textures stand out more clearly than on a dry surface. Although there’s no need to do this on a rainy day, licking rocks – as Zalasiewicz demonstrated during the ceremony with a 400-million-year-old rock – is a common workaround.

Homei Miyashita and Hiromi Nakamura received the nutrition prize “for experiments to determine how electrified chopsticks and drinking straws can change the taste of food”. Through electrical stimulation, humans can perceive information that they normally couldn’t with their tongue¹.

Unsurprisingly, water was also the official beverage of the 2023 Ig Nobel Prize ceremony and the overarching topic of the five lectures that delivered a complete technical description in 24 seconds, followed by a clear summary in 7 words. From Jasmine Nirody, we learned that “geckos’ bellies help them walk on water” and Andrea Sella explained how to make medium-density amorphous ice with a machine used to grind frozen salami.

The physics prize was awarded “for measuring the extent to which ocean-water mixing is affected by the sexual activity of anchovies”². As the winners explained in their acceptance speech, oceanographers used to believe that fish are too small to mix the water layers in the ocean. But as it turns out, they should care about anchovies having sex in coastal regions.

Marc Abrahams, who founded the Ig Nobel Prize in 1991, wrote in *The Guardian* that³,

“Observers may disagree as to which of these are good, which bad, which important, which trivial. Such distinctions are irrelevant to their winning a prize.” What it all comes down to is that the prize-winning science makes us laugh and then think. Admittedly, a certain sense of humour might be a prerequisite. The **peace prize awarded in the founding year** went to Edward Teller, “father of the hydrogen bomb and first champion of the Star Wars weapons system, for his lifelong efforts to change the meaning of peace as we know it.” Even if this happens not to be your sense of humour, it will at least make you think – and stick with you.

This fact is an important aspect of successful science communication. In 2022 for their 30-year-long effort in countering fake news with science, education and humour, the team behind the Ig Nobel Prize received the Heinz Oberhammer award for science communication endowed with €20,000 and – as the award’s eponym was fond of alpacas – a jar of alpaca droppings. **Abrahams promised** that, “Alpaca droppings will then multiply the greatness [of the ceremony] by some nicely irrational number.”

This promise is a highly entertaining thought and indeed, science communication should engage the respective audience. As this year’s communication prize “for methodically studying the boredom of teachers and students” showed, the mere anticipation of boredom makes it more likely to occur⁴ – at least in lectures. By all means, the Ig Nobel Prize and its celebration of quirky yet impactful science is not even remotely dull as dishwater.

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References

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