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## **WOMAN WHO FEEDS POISON TO PLANTS WINS 'DISCOVERY OF THE YEAR'**

*Discovery Channel and Royal Geographical Society reward breakthroughs in the boundaries of human understanding and achievement*

An arsenic loving plant is the unlikely star of the show at this year's Discovery Awards held in central London tonight (20<sup>th</sup> November).

The discovery of the brake fern's unusual taste in food promises to prevent illness and even death among millions of people living in Bangladesh where drinking water is polluted with arsenic.

In January this year Dr Lena Ma of the University of Florida found a fern whose leaves had 200 times the amount of arsenic than the surrounding polluted soil. The fern, in effect, absorbed the poison from the surrounding area. By simply planting the fern in polluted soil, it will be possible to 'clean' a piece of land and prevent the ground water becoming contaminated. In Bangladesh, where ground water is contaminated, it is estimated that up to 77million people are at risk through arsenic in drinking water. This can cause painful skin lesions and even cancer.

Dr Ma won in the '**Discovery of the Year**' category, recognising astonishing new scientific discoveries relating to our environment, culture and society. It is one of four awards, created by **Discovery Channel** in partnership with **The Royal Geographical Society**, recognising those people engaged in pushing the boundaries of human understanding and achievement. The awards confer not only prestige but also £5000 towards the costs of ongoing work.

The **Lifetime of Discovery Award**, went to James Lovelock, an 80 year old British chemist who has changed the way we view the Earth forever. This award recognises people who have shown a lifetime's commitment to increasing mankind's knowledge and understanding of our planet and our responsibilities towards it.

Having worked for NASA in the 1960's trying to determine whether life existed on Mars, Lovelock swapped viewpoints and began to view Earth from the point of view of a Martian. Why was there life on Earth? He

developed a unique theory of a self-regulating 'living system'. The theory caught the public imagination once it was given a name by Lovelock's then neighbour, *Lord of the Flies* author William Golding. Golding dubbed the theory 'Gaia' after the Greek Earth Goddess.

Lovelock went on to become one of the leading experts in atmospheric sciences. He invented the electron capture detector which was used in the 1970s to monitor the effect of CFCs on the ozone layer and which highlighted the extent of global warming.

The **Discovery Inspiration Award** for people who have inspired others to discover and understand the fascinating world in which we live went to the yachtswoman, Ellen MacArthur. Ellen's story is well known and recognised as a story of human endeavour, often against adversity, that has inspired many.

Her determination to realise her sailing dreams is now the stuff of legend. Whether it was putting all her pocket money as a child towards her first boat; living in a portakabin for three years while trying to raise sponsorship money; or climbing a broken mast in a South Atlantic storm - she has always shown great self sacrifice and courage to realise her dream. Of course, earlier this year she also became the fastest woman ever to sail single-handedly round the world.

Finally, the **Sustainable Development Award**, a new award for 2001 which recognises projects that have made a real difference to people's lives or the environment at a grass roots level, was awarded to David Schweidenback. While living in a remote village in Ecuador, he became interested in why one villager – a carpenter – was much richer than other villagers. He soon discovered that it was because the carpenter owned a bicycle and was therefore able to service a much wider 'market' than his rivals. He became convinced of the power of the simple bicycle to boost individual income and grow markets in developing countries.

In 1991 he founded Pedals for Progress (PFP), a non-profit making organization. PFP rescues bicycles destined for US landfills and ships them to developing countries where they are sold at minimal cost. PFP operates in 11 countries and is aiming to ship between 15-20,000 bikes next year. Many of the PFP programmes become self-sufficient by establishing bicycle shops with tools, parts and accessories for maintaining the bikes, and by training children and adults to do the repair work.

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**Notes to editors:**

- The Discovery/RGS Awards are now in their fourth year. They are voted for by a panel comprising of leading **Royal Geographical Society** members and senior management of **Discovery Networks Europe**
- Discovery Channel showcases the best of the world's factual programming, enabling people to discover and explore their world and satisfy their curiosity. Discovery Channel Europe is watched by over 28 million people in 51 countries, customised into 20 languages, via 35 feeds
- The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) is the professional body for Geography. One of its aims is to stimulate the awareness and enjoyment of geography at all levels, for all people, both in the UK and around the world. The Society supports over 20 first-rate academic research groups, promotes geography within the National Curriculum, provides training in scientific field techniques and assists personal development in young people through expeditions.

**Award category guidelines:****Discovery 2001 Award**

Every year sees astonishing new scientific discoveries made about our environments, cultures and societies. New knowledge is the lifeblood of managing our fragile planet and often guides us to sustainable development. This award recognises the importance of new scholarly discovery and those whose work extends our frontiers of knowledge.

**A Lifetime of Discovery Award**

There are those of whom Discovery is a way of life. This award goes to people in the later stages of their career. It recognises the commitment and effort of those who have successfully devoted themselves to a lifetime of spent in developing our knowledge of the environment, or in raising awareness, enthusiasm and understanding about the world and our responsibilities to it.

**The Discovery Inspiration Award**

This award recognises great communicators who have inspired others to discover and understand the fascinating world in which we live. Could be a teacher, presenter, author or multi-media creator, winners share the ability to enthuse through clear, lively and accessible presentation. The award also recognises people who have led by example, and through their remarkable achievements (often against adversity) have inspired many others.

**The Sustainable Development Award (new)**

Discovery in association with Shell International extended the awards remit this year to recognise projects that have made a real difference to people's lives, or the environment, at a grass roots level. In keeping with the spirit of the awards, the remit states that recipients of the Sustainable Development Award should operate on a smaller, local scale.