

Scales of SUCCESS

Devi Stuart-Fox's childhood fascination with the habits of bearded dragons set her on the path to a rewarding career as a natural scientist.

When Devi Stuart-Fox was a youngster living in the outer suburbs of Brisbane, one of her favourite pastimes was catching bearded dragons on her way home from school, putting them into an enclosure in her back yard, then observing them until they escaped.

"I guess I simply found their behaviour fascinating. I never wanted to keep them in captivity for long, so I would feed them, watch them and, when they disappeared, I would go out and catch some more," she says, laughing.

Now, 12 years on, this passion has transformed that teenage schoolgirl into Dr Stuart-Fox, a 27-year-old with a Bachelor of Arts degree in anthropology and philosophy, a Bachelor of Science in ecology, evolution population and evolutionary genetics and a doctorate in Agamidae lizards – the aforementioned dragons – from Queensland University.

Last month, her dedication paid off when she received \$33,000 as the Asia-Pacific winner of the 2003 L'Oréal-UNESCO Women in Science Fellowship, one of the most lucrative prizes



Devi will explore the mystery of chameleons.

the highlands of Sri Lanka or camping for months on end in the Flinders Ranges – all in the name of scientific research.

"I always feel incredibly safe. I generally take a research assistant with me, and we have a four-wheel drive with an emergency satellite beacon. The trickiest situation I have ever been in was when the vehicle got bogged in 50°C degree heat. We had to find a tunnel to shelter from the sun and wait for it to get dark before we could even begin to dig ourselves out."

Devi is looking forward to studying chameleons – the closest relatives to bearded dragons – because little is known about their habits. "One of the things that really fascinated me was that they change colour according to the social situation they are in.

"THE WONDERFUL THING ABOUT science is that it doesn't care about national boundaries ... it is there for everyone."

available to young scientists. The L'Oréal-UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) award will go towards the cost of studying chameleons at the University of the Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Despite her stellar career path, Devi is not a stereotypical academic. She can wax lyrical about the endearing qualities of her beloved dragons – apparently they communicate by waving their legs and bobbing their heads – yet she enjoys nothing better than cooking in her mum's Brisbane kitchen, or hiking with her boyfriend of 10 years, fellow student Adnan Moussalli.

Devi is the daughter of a part-French, part-Chinese, part-Vietnamese mother who was educated in Paris, and a British father raised in Australia – an exotic parentage that has given her a broad view of life. Devi thinks nothing of spending a few months doing fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, weeks braving

I want to know more about when and why. As chameleons are only found in Africa and Madagascar, South Africa is the best place to study them because it is comparatively close. I am delighted the L'Oréal Fellowship has given me that chance."

In addition to her financial prize, Devi was treated to five days in Paris, courtesy of L'Oréal, which is sponsoring this prestigious award for the fifth successive year. Along with 14 other fellowship winners from around the globe, she presented her work at the prestigious Pasteur Institute in Paris. The climax of the trip was the awards ceremony at UNESCO headquarters, presented by the UNESCO director-general Koichiro Matsuura and attended by many of the world's top scientists.

"The wonderful thing about science is that it doesn't care about national boundaries ... it is there for everyone," says Devi. **W**

– ISLA WHITCROFT