

ICA Excellence Award 2025 – Early-Stage Academic

Personal statement

Assoc. Prof. Tanja Šumrada

I am deeply honoured to be selected as this year's nominee for the Early-Stage Academic ICA Excellence Award. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the selection committee for their decision to recognise my work and that of my team of PhD students, as research, especially an interdisciplinary one, is indeed very much the result of teamwork.

The life of an early-stage academic is indeed full of challenges, but in my experience, it is also deeply rewarding. I am grateful to my PhD supervisor, Professor Emil Erjavec, and the lead of our research group, Professor Luka Juvančič, for their continued support of our work on biodiversity conservation in the agri-food sector.

Tackling the emerging biodiversity crisis presents specific new challenges to the agri-food sector and policy. Compared to the closely related climate crisis, biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation remain relatively poorly understood among farmers, the food industry, consumers and policy-makers. The impact of the biodiversity crisis is often challenging to grasp in local settings, where the loss of some endangered species may not be readily apparent in farm production results. Setting aside part of the land to ensure the recovery of semi-natural habitats and the thriving populations of farmland species is thus often difficult to justify.

On the other hand, farmland biodiversity loss is also significantly driven by agricultural abandonment, which is becoming a key land-use driver in many marginal regions of Europe. Here, nature conservation and restoration should walk hand in hand with rural development and food policies. However, we often observe that these regions are also significantly under-researched. We, therefore, struggle to find solutions that enable effective habitat management with contemporary technology, while ensuring they are supported by economically viable farming systems.

The work of our team at the University of Ljubljana is thus driven by the recognition that sustainable transition and the tackling of the biodiversity crisis are, in essence, societal issues. Therefore, no matter the depth of new insights from life science research or the brilliance of novel technological solutions, their success in real-world settings hinges on their effective communication to society, integration into the economic sector, and support from effective policies.