

**17 European Avalanche Warning Services - 20 years of European Avalanche danger scale
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Tribute to Dr. Bernd Zenke

‘Father’ of the Avalanche Danger Scale and the Bavarian Matrix

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed avalanche forecasters and warners,

It is not only a deep honor for me, it is also a personal pleasure to speak on this occasion here today a tribute devoted to someone who has set his indelible stamp on our profession like no one else in recent years:

Dr. Bernd Zenke, Director of the Avalanche Warning Center of Bavaria is well known to all of us as the ‘Father’ of the General European Avalanche Danger Scale as well as the so-called ‘Bavarian Matrix’.

I have known Bernd for a quarter of a century now and I have learned a great deal from him during that time:

Bernd has never been a man of big words or loud voice. He isn’t someone who pounds his fist on the table or is gung-ho to make an impression. He always does things with a gentle touch. His ‘weapons’ were a sharp intellect and alert mind which was always focused on the quintessential thing: the improvement and ongoing evolution of avalanche warnings.

Bernd produced his masterpiece in 1993 in Wildbad Kreuth. Until that time, Europe’s avalanche warning was completely fragmented, practically every country had its own danger scale, the situation for users was utterly confusing and difficult to use.

The initial talks which attempted to unite and standardize the various systems always ran up against the ‘BIG’ avalanche warning services which were not willing to change their own standpoint. In this hopeless situation, Bernd managed -through many months of painstaking, cautious preliminary talks -to prepare the groundwork for a general scale. It was without doubt a tactical masterstroke!

During that period I had many talks with him and always admired the finesse and the subtlety, the carefulness but also the strength of purpose with which Bernd set about his work. He knew personally all the members of the EAWS at the time and knew exactly how to go about negotiations with each individual in order to reach the ultimate goal.

The reward of his efforts came at the legendary conference in April 1993 in Wildbad Kreuth in his own homeland of Bavaria, during three days of hardbitten, rough-and-tough negotiations which very often seemed to be on the verge of failure, but in the end a general, five-level ‘European Avalanche Danger Scale’ was born and made its entrance into the world!

Bernd, for that tour-de-force I thank you personally! Ladies and gentlemen, please, a round of applause!



Even in the years which followed, Bernd never lost the focus of 'his' scale and applied his profound knowledge to it at all the subsequent conferences. One of his major objectives was -and still is -that the scale not get watered down.

Thus, the definitions have been adjusted only very gingerly and with great care.

A further milestone he developed was the matrix, which in the meantime is being used by all the avalanche warning services.

Bernd, we wish you all the best, most of all flawless forecasts during your final winter as 'avalanche warner'. Even though I am quite sure that we will sorely miss you in this organization: as a guest, you will always be welcome in our circle! Moreover, hot tips from 'elder statesmen' are treated with special respect, as everyone knows!

Enjoy the coming years with your family, free of avalanche dangers. And just in case things get slightly boring: you know that in Tyrol we always reserve a few juicy avalanche slopes especially for our friends in Bavaria... :-)

Many, many thanks for everything! We bid you farewell with our warmest wishes for the future and 'Pfiat Di' -for those aliens sitting in the room, that is a very special Bavarian-Tyrolean send-off.

Rudi Mair, Avalanche Warning Service Tyrol

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