

### **Third ALTER-Net Summer School on “Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services”**

Peyresq, 2-14 September 2008

#### *Some personal impressions*

A group of 32 PhD students received almost 30 lectures from the social and natural sciences on the topic biodiversity and ecosystem services. The Millenium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) was frequently used as a point of reference. The PhD students were mainly European, but also included an Argentinian, an Indonesian and two Australians. Two weeks with a full programme and a diverse set of people gave me a huge intellectual and social impulse. The programme can be found on: <http://www.pik-potsdam.de/alter-net/> and consisted of 6 lectures from the social sciences perspective and 17 lectures from the natural sciences perspective. Each PhD student gave a short poster presentation on his/her research. The sheer volume of the intellectual and social programme was made digestible by the peaceful and beautiful surroundings: the Alpes de Hautes-Provence. Here, I try to summarize some of my thoughts, impressions or lessons learned during the two weeks.

First of all, it was very enriching for me to get familiar with other perspectives of social sciences on environmental issues, as my own group only focuses on governance studies. Anthony Patt introduced a comparative view on biodiversity and ecosystem services issues, using an economics view (rational actor paradigm), a psychological view (positive and negative affect), sociological view (social norms and rules systems) and a view from the political sciences (power relations). Furthermore, a lecture on ethical issues of the MA pointed out difficulties with valuation of biodiversity and ecosystem services, especially monetary valuation (Sybille van den Hove; see also report of that lecture). These difficulties concern how to evaluate species that have unknown functions, how to aggregate individually attributed values, how to deal with changing value of money over time, how to value complex systems, how to value risks, etc. A lecture with a psychological starting point, illustrated ways how underlying values and beliefs of individuals can lead to their view on biodiversity, ecosystem services and subsequently nature conservation (Anke Fischer; see also report of that lecture). It was good to see a firm analytical explanation of how individuals come to their view on how to ‘conserve’ nature (e.g. strong or weak intervention, ‘natural’ or ‘human’ intervention, no intervention at all). Additionally, a lecture with a long-term, archeological perspective, showed an interesting case of how a group of people dealt with natural resources in Europe 2000 years ago (Sander van der Leeuw; see also report of that lecture).

Governance input, however, was definitely lacking in my view. Especially after a number of lectures that had an emergency call character (if we don’t act now, the human world is going to be in serious trouble in 2100) (Will Steffen, Martin Sharman, Simron Singh, Marina Fischer-Kowalski). Those emergency call lectures ended with a sense of urgency, but not with illustrating interesting or promising developments of societal change. Governance studies analyse drivers and mechanisms of societal change and aim to understand their force, functioning and impact. From those analyses interesting explanatory relations can be learned. However, these observed explanatory relations are not solutions or ‘how can’ prescriptions; they are explanations of how societal coalitions and relations may work. In the light of so many emergency calls, I think it would have been interesting to also discuss some interesting developments (successful examples of e.g. covenants, public-private partnerships, payments for environmental services, common pool resources management). I expect that discussing such examples would also have lead our debate to possible trade-offs between efficiency/effectiveness and legitimacy/democracy.

Hal Mooney, Wolfgang Cramer and Rik Leemans talked about the ‘making of’ of the IPCC, MA and CBD reports. Once again, I noticed the importance of international relations studies. In a world with global change and global attempts to give structure to national/local policy makers (CBD, MA, IPCC/Kyoto), the driving forces are obviously a mixture of political interests and powers and economical and environmental concerns. I think that international relations studies play a pivotal role in understanding the processes and mechanisms behind these attempts. Moreover, these understandings may give helpful road signs to follow-up decisions. Anyway, I once heard an international relations analysis of how the Kyoto protocol was actually and really decided upon, which was very refreshing. So, for myself I want to keep in mind the input from the international relations to get a fuller spectrum of explanatory factors.

I was somewhat puzzled by the lecture on feminist political ecology (Hanne Svarstad). The lecture was about gender representation in decision making on nature conservation. The lecturer made clear that the normative viewpoint was deliberate, to make a point. The normative emphasis was chosen to draw attention to analyzing gender representation and making a political statement about gender equality in decision making. My puzzle was: why put the method above the aim? Why not emphasize and analyse fair/equal participation in general in decision making on nature conservation? And also include power inequalities concerning rich/poor, age groups, ethnic groups, religion or other possible power inequities. I noticed that I wasn’t convinced why a gender equality perspective should be more important than understanding the underlying mechanisms of power distribution in representation in decision making on nature conservation. (And then choose a theoretically relevant focus)

This intertwining of analytical and normative points of view relates to another discussion topic of the summer school. How can a scientist deal with being an understander and a need to be an activist at the same time? What do you do when you have findings, which you consider to be too important not to be publicly known? What do you do when your (public) job is to understand and know, but the (private) individual in you wants to make a change in society? While for some scientists it is immoral not to act when you know and are aware of findings, for some other scientists it is immoral to confuse (or abuse) the position of scientist and lobbyist/politician. Of course, no scientist is a neutral objective machine, but scientists should strive for it, and certainly not search for it. Where do I stand in this debate? Well, currently, I notice that I have a very strong preference for at least very clearly separating the two mouths. I think it is inhuman and probably also unwise to deny that scientists also feel societal responsibility and have political concerns. When scientists participate in media exposure or involve in political lobbying, I think it is important that it’s clear for the receiver of the message who’s talking: the scientist or the lobbyist. Wolfgang Cramer said some words about this at the end of the summer school. I don’t remember exactly what he said, but I remember that he pointed out that eventually, a scientist may lose credibility when he/she mixes up the roles.

Something that I expected, but that did not pop up in the discussion was the debate on positivistic, social-constructivist, postmodern views on science. Especially in debates with natural and social scientists the confrontations or differences between these paradigms are likely to come forward. For instance, a discourse analysis is likely to meet some critical questions from a positivistic ‘fundamentalist’. But apparently, the paradigms were not an issue these two weeks. Was that perhaps due to the majority of natural scientists among the PhDs, as awareness of these paradigms is typically not discussed in the training of natural sciences? Or was there already too much other stuff to talk about?

Furthermore, I noticed a striking difference in impact on a discussion between a question and an expression. For me, this was most obvious in the debate on religion. A discussion is fed differently when debaters express/comment their ideas, or when debaters question ideas

(whether their own, others or general ideas). The fertility of the discussion seems to increase when fed by questioning; when its the level of expressing, the development seems to stagnate somehow in introduction of the spectrum of ideas or in trying to convince each other. However, within the spectrum of questioning I also see a difference between questions driven by curiosity and questions driven by wanting to show the audience how much one knows or weaknesses one is able to spot.

A clear lesson learned for me, was that I was able to do the working group assignment a lot better when I could let go to take it serious. When you aim to deliver a 'good' product, in let's say 'challenging circumstances', there are so many worrying signs in and around your brain, that it may block the flow somehow. When you let these worrying signs fly away, there is a lot more space to just have fun together and finish the assignment in a quick and relaxed way. The amount of mental space the relieve gives that a group assignment is not serious, is something to remember.

Finally, it was great to meet and learn from some inspiring scientists and a variety of PhD students. I am very happy that I did this summer school and I feel my brain is stretched. And! I am very happy that I got the opportunity to discover more of France's Alpine mountains, forests, lakes, mountain goats and marmots, ravens and eagles, vegetation (wild raspberries:), shepherds, lavender, splendid views and natural silence.

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