

## Successful SSAM Conference, February 27 – March 2, 2009

The Summer School Alumni Meeting (SSAM) in Hannover, Germany convened a group of enthusiastic PhD students for four intensive days of workshops, lectures, and collaboration. The sixteen students represent twelve different countries and have research interests that approach biodiversity issues from a wide variety of angles and disciplines. We had previously met at the ALTER-Net summer school in Peyresq, France in 2008, which meant we were able to “hit the ground running” for the intensive weekend of collaboration. We had many goals for the conference: to strengthen our network of collaboration, to deepen skills and foster discussions on topics not typically addressed in PhD programs, and to progress on an ambitious plan to coauthor a journal article. The following summarizes some of what we accomplished over the weekend.

Dr. Frank Burnet, emeritus professor of science communication at the University of the West of England, led us through a workshop focused on communicating effectively with non-specialist audiences. As Dr. Burnet pointed out, this skill set is especially important for those working across disciplines. Communicating clearly is key to interdisciplinary success!

Dr. Barbara Sterk, researcher in the Land Use Planning Group, Wageningen University, The Netherlands, provided an enlightening lecture on the nature of knowledge and how science is constructed. Among the topics discussed was the role of positivism versus constructivism in the creation of knowledge and the role of scientists as advocates for the knowledge they create.

A workshop on defining and prioritizing policy-relevant research questions for a sustainable future was led by Dr. Ad van Dommelen, director of the SENSE Research School for Socio-Economic and Natural Sciences of the Environment, The Netherlands. During the workshop, we each defined a research question, then refined our question based on feedback from others. The results of this exercise will be posted on the SENSE website ([www.sense.nl](http://www.sense.nl)).

Another focus of the conference was advancing ideas and focus for a journal

article (responding to Cramer et al. 2008) that the group will continue working on through the following months. This process is being led by two of the group members, and with tireless efforts, the two facilitated the group through challenging discussions on focus, framework, and content. The results from these discussions will provide key components to the final article.

The conference concluded with a discussion of how we would like to continue our collaboration and network as a group. After deliberation, we decided that we will join the SENSE network as individuals. SENSE will provide our group with our own communication platform within their network, which we will use to generate ideas for future projects, collaborations, and meetings. We are enthusiastic and optimistic about our potential as a group and look forward to directing our energies to future projects!

This successful conference would not have been possible without the generous contributions of funders. Organizations that contributed funds to the conference include: ALTER-Net, Wageningen University, The Netherlands; Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research, Germany; Department of Research Management, University of Bergen, Norway; Institute of Terrestrial Ecosystems, ETH Zurich, Switzerland; and WIMEK, Wageningen University, The Netherlands. The conference also benefited from numerous individuals who donated their time and energy to ensure a well organized, insightful, and successful weekend.

