

First Annual Kachana Landscape Workshop

A Central European View

Speech of Patrick von Däniken

“Introduction”

Dear ladies and gentlemen, my name is Patrick von Däniken, I am a student in Forestry Engineering at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich.

Thank you Chris and Jacqui for giving me the opportunity to be here and have this speech, thanks Danny for reading my drafts and correcting mistakes and thanks to everyone that was giving me inputs so far, so that I could build myself an own opinion. Of course this opinion is probably not my final one, because I'm still learning and I hope to be able to learn every day in my ongoing life and change my point of view, where I might be wrong!

You probably ask yourselves, what a Swiss forestry student does out here in the Kimberley's Savannas, where we have no big forests like we know them in other regions of the earth...

“So why am I here?”

Last year the Federal Institute of Technology Zurich started with the idea to found a new course of studies with the existing departments of “Forest Sciences”, “Agricultural Sciences”, “Environmental Sciences”, “Earth Sciences” and “Food Sciences”. 120 professors, assistants and students of all these departments sat together and discussed in groups the past, the strengths and weaknesses in education and research of the system today and finally the challenges now and in the future in the terms of opportunities and threats.

With this analysis it was possible to build the vision of a new “Centre of Environmental Systems” and to work out the best possible environment for education and research. In the end there will still be forest engineers, agricultural engineers and environmental scientists, but they will all have nearly the same topics in the first years of studies. Their similar bachelor degree will allow these students to be able to talk and discuss together since they are talking the same language. I think it is very important nowadays, that we begin more and more to look at the environmental systems as a whole and not on a competitive way. It doesn't help to point out all the mistakes our neighbour does; we have to do the job on our side as good as possible. So we don't have to look for problems, there are too many, we have to find solutions. And these solutions will only be found if we start to search for them together.

“What do I do here?”

If we look at the soils here and if we see, what Chris has achieved so far by working with the cattle and by keeping fire out, the results are amazing to me. Where there were red capped patches ten years ago, we can observe a soil formation.

Where we used to see a lot of annual grasses, perennial grasses start to grow.

For seven weeks I've helped move Chris' cattle herd. I have never worked with cattle before but I learned to live as a part of that herd very quickly. I began to see a ranking

system within the herd and the herd began to accept my presence. Like that I was able to observe the impact, the herd has on their environment. I've learnt how Chris uses the livestock as a management tool.

In the time I've been here, I could also discover the impact that fire has on this land. Of course there will still be "paperbark trees" and "eucalypts" if fires will go on sweeping through this land, but if the land will be burnt continuously, a lot of perennial grasses and species like the "cypress pine" ("Callitris intratropica") will get extinct. This pine is the one and only native conifer of the region! I've been on another camp of Chris two valleys to the west, where I have seen a quite intact forest of "cypress pines". Chris told me, that they successfully kept the fire out of that forest since 1988. And I've seen the impact fire had on areas outside that forest. There were no young pines any more. Annual grasses took over in the ground layer and the seedlings of the remaining old pines would have no chance to get enough light and water on the soil to grow. If we have areas like this burnt constantly every year or every second year, we will lose the "cypress pine" and soon other species of this region, too. Trees like the "eucalypts" and a lot of single annual grasses will survive but will also be under pressure due to fire and soil erosion. If we look at eco systems we have to make a difference between the term richness, which is the overall number of species and the term diversity, where we also look on how many different species we have and how many individuals there are of every specie.

"Practitioners and Theorists"

Coming back to the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, there is one other thing that seems to be quite important to me. In our courses, we have one full year in which we have the opportunity to absolve practical stages. Students spread out to get practical experience in the field as well as conducting research assignments both in Switzerland and abroad. Like that we get an insight into the work, that is done and we get to see problems from the practical point of view. That of course is a great opportunity. The idea of this is to stop academics from rocketing off with irrelevant theoretical theories and to equip graduates with some understanding of practical realities and challenges.

So far I learned that we have to think not only across different factions but also work close together with the people working in the field. Like that we are able to create a network between practitioners and theorists. Students and theorists can begin to study issues that really have to be solved and help the practitioners to have their work done easier instead of putting them new rocks into their way. On the other hand the practitioners can communicate, what problems occur in their work to be solved and have some of their solutions analyzed.

For example: After the Second World War people in Switzerland began to use a lot of wood. They chopped down forests to the bare ground to have enough wood for heating and for building up the armament industry. In the mean time they started to farm mountain slopes to produce enough food in the hard years of war. Nowadays all the small farms in the Swiss mountains can't survive the growing competition on the market against big farms. A lot of farmers of small farms go bankrupt and have to sell their farms. But as soon as the landscape is not being farmed any more the soils are getting more and more eroded. If a theorist looks at that topic today, he sees the landscape erode. What he decides is to build up constructions to fight against the erosion. Like that a lot of anti avalanche constructions have been built up and slopes have been drained to get them more stable. If the theorist and the practitioner begin to work together, we find solutions to resettle farmers in areas like that and in some places we can start to grow forests. There are programs that combine forestry and agriculture together. We call the new areas "Forest-Pastures". On these areas there is cattle moving on pastures with trees on it. Like

that farmers can produce milk or meat with cattle and at the same time the trees can be used for wood production. As long as the production happens in a sustainable way we can rebuild multifunctional stable soils and help to recover landscapes.

You see, we are again at the point, where practitioners and theorists of different disciplines can work together and find solutions.

The critical point of view (with helps from Prof. Dr. H. R. Heinemann, ETH Zurich)

Not everything that is happening in the process at the “Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich” is good. It is very important, to have a holistic approach. But the most difficult thing is how to put it into action. We are situated at a stage of the “interest group liberalism”, in which the aim is to find a compromise. Like that we are content as soon as a compromise has been found, no matter whether the solution contributes to solving the former problem. This “interest group liberalism” distinguishes itself, that everyone talks about words like process, stakeholder, participation, working in groups, etc. But at the same time the view for problems gets out of sight. I’m sure, that for real turnarounds we need something like leadership. Unfortunately we don’t have leadership in all processes, that’s where we have to think about a change in management. And that of course has a lot to do with learning capability. I still want to learn a lot and I hope you can tell me, where I should look at things differently, otherwise I will never be able to learn anything.

Looking at Kachana again, I can see that Chris has a good working management and he took the leadership to get Kachana back to a healthier environment than it used to be...

Discussion

Well I now invite you, to take on the thread with your point of views, doubts and comments.