

December 2011

UNU-LRT Mission

The mission of UNU-LRT is to train specialists from developing countries to combat land degradation and restore degraded land, and to assist strengthening institutional capacity and gender equality in the field of land restoration and sustainable land management in developing countries.

Strategic Plan 2011-2016

In June 2011, the UNU-LRT Strategic Plan 2011-2016 was launched. The Strategic Plan can be found on the UNU-LRT website, www.unulrt.is

Facebook

UNU-LRT is now on Facebook. Our Facebook page will keep you up to date with what is going on at UNU-LRT, provide news about new and former fellows, tell you what is happening in land restoration in Iceland and give you links to international stories on environmental issues we think are worth sharing. Please like us on Facebook – www.facebook.com/unulrt

UNU-LRT Newsletter

Dear Friends of UNU-LRT

Another good year for the UNU-Land Restoration Training Programme has come to an end. In this UNU-LRT Newsletter, we want to report on the main activities and milestones reached in 2011. Moreover, we send our best wishes for the festive season ahead and many thanks for the acceptance and interest the Programme has received in 2011.

Happy New Year!

Hafdis Hanna Aegisdottir, Berglind Orradottir and Thorbjorg Valdis Kristjansdottir



Six-Month Training in 2011

As in previous years, the annual six-month training programme was this year's main milestone. In 2011, the number of fellows offered a fellowship increased for the first time since the programme was launched in 2007. Eight fellows participated in the programme, coming from; Ghana (2 fellows), Mongolia (2), Uganda (2), Ethiopia (1) and Niger (1). The fellows participated in various courses and in one of the two specialized lines offered this year, namely a) Land degradation assessment / Land restoration, and b) Sustainable land management. The fellows' projects were diverse in this year's programme. Some were strictly scientific and included field- and lab work and/or mapping, while others were closer to the field of social sciences and included surveys and examination of participatory approaches in land management, and an evaluation of legal frameworks and policies related to grazing lands. The eight fellows graduated on 29 September 2011, and at the graduation ceremony the Minister for the Environment, Mrs. Svandis Svavarsdottir, addressed the fellows and handed out the certificates.



The UNU-LRT fellows at the graduation ceremony 29 September 2011. Photo: Askell Thorisson.

News from Former Fellows

2008 Fellow: Taimi Sofia Kapalanga from Namibia

Taimi Kapalanga serves as a Senior Environmental Research Technician at the Gobabeb Training and Research Centre in Namibia. Taimi is also studying for a Master's degree in Environmental Management at the University of the Free State in South Africa. Taimi says: "Being a Young Professional Research Associate in the environmental management discipline, I have noted the significance of maintaining ecological functions and integrity. Human activities such as mining and agriculture are the major drivers for the loss of soils, biodiversity and entire ecological functions. It is therefore imperative to have action plans that ensure better management before and after disturbance. It is for this reason that I conducted a study aimed at understanding water infiltration and retention abilities of disturbed topsoil from a uranium mine in the central Namib Desert. The answers to research questions of this study will contribute to the understanding and management of topsoil for the ecological restoration of mined lands". Taimi's research project is under the Namib Ecological Restoration Monitoring Unit at Gobabeb Research Centre.



Taimi Kapalanga (standing) looking at *Welwitschia mirabilis* in the Namib desert in Namibia. Photo: Hafdis Hanna Aegisdottir.



Fred Yikii from Uganda is a former fellow from 2009. Photo: from Fred Yikii.

2009 Fellow: Fred Yikii from Uganda

Fred Yikii joined the UNU-Land Restoration Training Programme in April 2009. At that time, he was a Teaching Assistant in The Department of Community Forestry and Extension, Makerere University in Uganda. He was also about to complete a Master's degree in Agroforestry. Currently, he serves as an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Environmental Management at Makerere University, a position partly influenced by the training he attained in sustainable land management during the UNU- Land Restoration Training Programme. While he has continued to teach courses in his previous department, he has also taken new assignments including teaching new courses such as Environmental Education and Communication and supervision of undergraduate special projects in the fields of land restoration and sustainable land management. Furthermore, he is a team member on a research project on the management of wetlands for improving food security. This project based on the premise that land degradation has led to a decline in food production in Uganda. Productive agricultural land is also becoming less available due to unpredictable rainfall and degradation of the traditional upland agricultural areas thus forcing farmers to resort to cultivation and grazing in wetlands to meet their needs including food. The project therefore seeks ways of using the wetlands for improving food security in a sustainable manner.

Fred is fond of his learning experiences in Iceland and the training has greatly influenced his teaching. Some of his students have gone on to promoting land care practices in their home areas after completing their degree.

UNU Rector visits Iceland

The rector of the United Nations University, Prof. Dr. Konrad Osterwalder, visited the UNU Iceland-based programmes from 3-4 November, 2011. During his stay in Iceland, he visited the UNU-LRT headquarters at Keldnaholt where he was welcomed by the UNU-LRT director as well as the rector of the Agricultural University of Iceland, the director of the Soil Conservation Service of Iceland and two members of the UNU-LRT studies committee.

Dr. Konrad Osterwalder rector of the United Nations University discusses land restoration in Iceland with Asa L. Aradottir, professor at the Agricultural University of Iceland. Photo: Berglind Orradottir



Story from the 2011 Programme

By Hafdis Hanna Aegisdottir

In the unpredictable Icelandic summer, a group of specialists from sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia meets up with Icelandic farmers, local consultants, scholars and entrepreneurs in a week-long fieldtrip around the island. It is an unusually cold summer. Warm protective clothing is necessary to cope with the rain and the cold. Yet, the group stays alert and listens carefully. The group members come from afar and this is an experience of a lifetime – an opportunity to learn and to share experiences and knowledge.

The trip is a part of an annual six-month training course at the UNU-Land Restoration Training Programme (UNU-LRT) in Iceland. After weeks of classroom lessons and short excursions, the fieldtrip finally links the issues covered in the classroom with real experiences in the field. It should be an eye-opener – a platform for communications and exchanging of ideas.

The six-month training course of UNU-LRT is custom-built for professionals in developing countries facing severe land degradation. The course gives an overview of the extent and drivers behind land degradation and desertification as well as the processes and principles of land degradation, ecological restoration and sustainable land use on a broad scale. Environmental governance and land management planning is also covered along with various practical exercises. The fieldtrip takes place in the middle of the summer – by the end of the first half of the training and before the participants start concentrating on their individual project work, which takes up the latter half of their stay in Iceland.

This year's group of specialists is diverse though all group members come from developing countries dealing with severe land degradation. Despite their different backgrounds, they all share a passion for restoring degraded ecosystems and promoting sustainable land use. The knowledge and experiences they attain in the training course are valuable when they return to their homes, since there is great need for expert knowledge in this field in poorer countries of the world. An international training course that focuses on capacity building within local institutions in developing countries is therefore much needed.

Yet, what can a Ghanaian researcher, natural resource officer from Uganda, and a Mongolian lawyer working on environmental issues, learn in a training programme located on a cold North-Atlantic island – far away from the Sahel region or the Mongolian Gobi? First and foremost, the learning takes place when specialists from different countries and cul-



The UNU-LRT fellows participating in the 2011 six-month programme. Photo: Hafdis Hanna Aegisdottir.

tures meet and spend endless time together listening, learning and sharing their views on environmental issues and how best to tackle them locally and globally. They also hear about the Icelandic experience – successes and challenges in a century of activities preventing soil erosion and restoring degraded ecosystems in Iceland. Land degradation is widespread in Iceland. After centuries of unsustainable land use, combined with harsh natural conditions - including cold periods and volcanic activity, most of the native woodlands disappeared and much of the continuous vegetation cover had been replaced with desertified land. However, the soil conservation activities, which started systematically over a century ago, have led to invaluable experiences and knowledge on how to combat land degradation and re-vegetate denuded landscapes under harsh conditions. At the same time, Icelandic society changed from being one of the poorest in Europe – mainly dependent on fish and farming – to a wealthy modern society with a fruitful research and university sector.

The fieldtrip's first stop is at Solvabakki sheep farm in northern Iceland. Anna Margret Jonsdottir, a cheerful and hard-working farmer and farming extension agent in her mid-thirties, welcomes us. The farm has been in her family for over a century, and she passionately explains her family's attempts to restore pastureland on their property. She and her family members have participated in the programme *Farmers Heal the Land* for over 15 years. The programme, established by the Soil Conservation Service of Iceland (SCSI) in 1990, assists farmers to halt soil erosion and re-vegetate degraded land on their own land by offering consultation, seeds and fertilizer to the farmers involved. The seeding, fertilizing and transport cost is,



Anna Margret Jonsdottir, a farmer and farming extension agent in northern Iceland. Photo: Hafdis Hanna Aegisdottir.



The participants meet Bjarni Marónsson, a local consultant of the Soil Conservation Service of Iceland. Photo: Hafdis Hanna Aegisdottir.

however, taken care of by the farmers themselves. The programme, which involves about 25% of all Icelandic farms, has been successful. It has increased awareness of landcare, built bridges between disciplines and improved land conditions.

The participants also meet Bjarni Maronsson, a local consultant of SCSI in northern Iceland. It is always a great joy meeting Bjarni and it is obvious how he enjoys sharing his views and experiences with the UNU-LRT participants. Bjarni alone is responsible for an area of 12,600 km², ranging from the ocean up to the highlands. During the summer months, he needs to travel far, giving advice to farmers and following up on several projects, which are ongoing in his area. In a genuine and leisurely manner, he explains how innovation and imagination was necessary to find a solution to hinder persistent sand movements, which were affecting the land, people and road conditions in the area. A large part of Bjarni's time is spent visiting farmers, discussing the importance of sustainable land use and giving advice if their land is overgrazed. Moreover, river bank protection in the lowlands and reclamation projects in the highlands are within his call of duties.

Close to Lake Myvatn – a well-known Ramsar wildlife refuge and bird paradise in northern Iceland – the group meets Olafur Arnalds, a professor in soil sciences at the Agricultural University of Iceland and well-known to the group as one of the UNU-LRT core lectures. Olafur takes the group to one of the biggest areas in Iceland protected from sheep graz-

ing. The area, which is located in the volcanic active zone, is characterized by black sands as a result of desertification in the middle ages. Before having a warm Icelandic meat soup and black rye bread for supper after a cold day in the field, the participants visit the northern territory of Vatnajökull National Park. In Iceland, the tourist industry is expanding – resulting in the need for well-managed national parks and other protective areas with informative and attractive visitors' centers as well as a selection of interesting activities.

After the hearty and warm meat soup and a good night's sleep, the group is ready to continue. Hallormsstadur forest in East-Iceland is next on the list, where the group meets Bergrun Arna Thorsteinsdottir, a forest warden and entrepreneur. Two years ago, Bergrun and a colleague of hers started a small business that uses local products to produce syrup, jam and other food products. Her brand product is new to the Icelandic cuisine, syrup made from the sap of the native birch tree (*Betula pubescens*). Bergrun is an example of what can be achieved with creativity, hard work and courage – a good take-home message for our group of participants.

Next on our list is Hofn (meaning Harbour), a small town on the south-east corner of Iceland. During the weekend of our arrival, an annual lobster festival is being held and the locals flock to introduce their products, meet each other and have fun despite the pouring rain. The purpose of our visit is to meet Thorvardur Arnason – the director of the University of Iceland's regional research centre at Hofn. Thorvardur is a multi-talent with an interesting background in biology, philosophy, filmmaking and photography. The local community in Hofn, the area's culture, and the spectacular nature surrounding the town, are of interest to Thorvardur and form the material for many of his research projects. He introduces the activities of the research center to our participants and takes them to a big and successful restoration area in the vicinity in the company of a local farmer, who knows the area like the palm of his hand. Another good lesson learned.

The fieldtrip is coming to an end. Several more stops are made and the fieldtrip has nearly covered the whole ring road around Iceland. The UNU-LRT participants have seen different landscapes, different cultures, different views, compared to what they are used to. The week has hopefully given the participants a more holistic view of how land degradation is combated in Iceland, and the collaboration between farmers, scientists and practitioners. Furthermore, they have been introduced to different land use practices, research and conservation work in Iceland. The completely alien environment challenges the participants to generate new ideas about how to deal with land degradation in their home countries. The six-month training of the UNU-LRT programme has reached a turning point – the first half of the training has come to an end. Now they should have gained enough knowledge and practical experience to work on their own individual project under the supervision of a specialist for the rest of their stay in Iceland. Just like the migrating birds, they will migrate south in the autumn. Still, they have something in their repertoire; new ideas, new knowledge, new views – to share when back home.

This article was the basis for the article "Combating Land Degradation in the high North", published on the UNU website (www.unu.edu) on 20 October 2011.



Paulina Peter Lokongo from Uganda busy taking notes in the field. Photo: Hafdis Hanna Aegisdottir.



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