

Post-Graduate Course

Soil, Biodiversity and Life

The contribution of soil to sustainability of life

(18-21 November 2012)

Wageningen, the Netherlands

General overview

The post-graduate course "Soil, Biodiversity and Life" hosted by NIOO (Netherlands institute of ecology) was connected to the annual meeting of the EU project EcoFINDERS (Ecological Function and Biodiversity Indicators in European Soils) in Wageningen. Both the course and annual EcoFINDERS meeting were linked to the symposium "Current Themes in Ecology Soil, Biodiversity and Life: The contribution of soil to sustainability of life".

The major part of the course program and the symposium was composed of lectures from eminent scientists in the field of soil ecology and biodiversity. Active discussions following each presentation were chaired by course participants. The discussions enhanced everyone's knowledge of the specific field. Participants (6-7) were grouped and assigned the task to compose a proposal for an EU-project using and combining all the information discussed during the course. Eventually each group was expected to present and defend their project proposal to a consortium consisting of the course leaders and other leading scientists. This proposal formed the key integrative element of the course.

Process of proposal writing and modifications of the task

The major limiting factor in the task of writing an EU project proposal within this course was time; in total, approximately two hours were adjusted to group work on the first day. These two hours included getting to know the other members including individual expertise, discussing the assignment, choosing a system to work on and getting organized. Additionally, preparing and conducting a short presentation on the first setup and plan of action completed the first day. One hour was budgeted to our group work at the end of day two to include new ideas of the presentations and discussions.

During dinner, however, several participants of the post graduate course actively discussed the overall task. This resulted in a re-organization: the groups merged into a single consortium to approach the task in a cooperative way. On one hand this reduced the scope for redundancy among the groups, but more importantly it created an opportunity to test the following hypothesis: Putting approximately 40 open-minded, creative people in one room will result in great science.

Convincing everyone to join and re-coordinating the groups needed some effort, leading to intense discussions and planning both in the night and in each second of spare time on the following day. Late on that day we finished the coordination of each group; we used the example of EcoFINDERS to organize in a hierarchical way so that each group became an individual workpackage (WP). Each WP chose one member as WP-leader for coordination. One overall project manager was additionally appointed to coordinate the individual WPs. Regular meetings of the project manager and WP leaders enabled us to combine different ideas and plan further proceedings more efficiently. The highly diverse scientific background, personal skills, creativity, nationality and high motivation of each course participant led to surprisingly large synergistic effects. Only due to all of these

aspects we managed to finalize our joined project proposal and successfully presented it on the last day.