REPORTAGE  Landscape research goes to school. Young researchers from all over the world spent a week learning about data, tools and models for analyzing patterns and processes in landscapes. The Linth Plain served as the case study region.

The bus meanders unhurriedly through the valley. The travellers take in the landscape rolling by, snap photos through the window or chat. English, German, Romanian or Farsi can be heard. The young women and men in the bus could be average tourists doing the round of sights in Switzerland as fast as possible. But they are not travelling from Zurich to Lucerne or Zermatt. Instead, they are staying on the Linth Plain, where tourists normally don’t stop. The “sights” they want to look at are: urban sprawl, landscape fragmentation, the Escher and the Linth Canal, the camping site Gäsi on Lake Walen and the Kaltbrunner Riet.

The raised bank of the Linth Canal is well visible during the short journey on the highway. Meadows and maize fields appear one after the other, with the mountains rising behind them a bit further away. In one of the fields storks are standing – much to the delight of the travellers. Mahsa, a 28-year-old Iranian, is one of them. She studied landscape and environmental design. It is her first trip to Switzerland, and she is really rather lucky to be on the bus today. Mahsa and the other travellers are taking part in the Summer School in “Land System Science”, which became booked out very quickly shortly after it was advertised. Like the other 23 participants, Mahsa got to Kerenzerberg in Filzbach (Canton Glarus) the previous evening. During the week she will learn about the data, methods, and models that are used today in landscape research, with the Linth Plain as the case study region. To get a feeling for the landscape here, the participants are now out on the bus excursion.

How can landscapes be modeled?
It is not just by chance that the Summer School is taking place here: “The Linth Plain is an everyday landscape. It can be used to illustrate, within a small area, various aspects of landscape research, such as the consequences of urban sprawl, the interconnection of different landscape elements or the planning of nearby recreation areas with the involvement of the local population,” explains the WSL landscape researcher, Janine Bolliger. She designed and organized the Summer School in cooperation with her colleague, Silvia Tobias. The number of inquiries they received took them both by surprise. “With so many people interested, we could have run two Summer Schools at once. Apparently our data- and tool-oriented course fills a niche.”

The participants travelled from all over the world to get here. Many of them grew up in very different landscapes – in e.g. South Africa, the USA, Iran, Vietnam, Pakistan, Hungary or Sweden. Nevertheless they did not often consider the differences between landscapes in their country of origin and the everyday Swiss landscape so great. “In Switzerland residential areas are built very
differently from ours. But the landscape and the complex interaction between 
humans and nature are very similar in Iran,” explains Mahsa during the short 
walk from the viewing tower in the Kaltbrunnerriet back to the bus.

The group of students is very mixed, and so are their academic backgrounds, 
bringing together soil and agricultural scientists, ecosystem researchers and 
landscape architects. Some have just started their doctoral research, whereas 
one participant had already qualified as a university lecturer. But they all share 
a common interest: they want to assess changes in the landscape – ongoing as 
well as ones that may happen sometime in the future – and study how such 
changes affect landscape patterns. Many of them registered for the Summer 
School because they wanted to learn how to handle GIS data or try out landscape 
modeling on the computer.

Practice, practice, practice

After the field trip the work starts: Over three days the participants practice 
how to handle data from remote sensing. They learn how to model different 
types of land use on the computer and how landscape changes can be visualized. 
And they find out how to develop landscape scenarios for the future jointly 
with the public. At the same time the lecturers also give them an idea about 
how they as scientists can support decision-making in practice about sustainable 
land use. In setting up this Summer School in collaboration with the Global 
Land Programme, the Universities of Wageningen and Amsterdam and the 
Center of Development and Environment (CDE) at the University of Bern, the 
Center for Landscape Research WSL has made an important contribution to 
the further education of landscape experts.

The participants don’t have much time for leisure activities during their 
week at Kenerzerberg. Before dinner they work in groups of three on the 
presentations they will give at the end of the week. Their task is to develop
potential projects for landscape research on the Linth Plain, which is quite a challenge in such a short time. But Janine is very pleased with the way the students refer to so many of the tools they were introduced to in their project proposals. Mahsa, the student from Iran, is also happy: “During this week I have been able to work with GIS data for the first time. I enjoyed it. For my doctorate I will be performing spatial analyses, which means I will be able to immediately apply what I have learned.”

After a last lunch together on Friday, the Summer School will come to an end. Many are travelling from Filzbach directly to Zurich Airport. Mahsa is, however, staying in Switzerland. For her the Summer School is the start of a new period in her life because, in two weeks, she will begin working on her doctorate at WSL in Birmensdorf. Over the next four years she will look into the differences between the urban green spaces in Switzerland and in Iran, and thus get to know Switzerland better. But first she has her sights on a rather different adventure: a German intensive course in Zürich. (lbo)