

There is no dancer but the dance

Interview with Johannes Heeb, IEES president

by Andreas Schönborn, Editor of the EcoEng Newsletter



Johannes Heeb, born 1960 in Switzerland, is a Dr. geographer and has been a pioneer of ecological engineering since the late 80s. He has been co-founder of numerous institutions dedicated to applied ecology and ecological engineering in a number of countries.

Today he is co-heading Seecon International, a consulting company focussing on sustainable development.

Info on Seecon: <http://www.seecon.ch>

Andreas Schönborn: **Johannes, would you call yourself an ecological engineer?**

Johannes Heeb: I consider ecological engineering a framework or a toolbox to implement sustainable development. I am Geographer, and ecological engineering helps me in my daily work in Switzerland and abroad to develop and make projects. According to Capra, years ago, "there is no dancer but the dance". Similarly, we could say "there is no ecological engineer, just ecological engineering".

AS: What is in your view a good Ecological Engineering project?

Johannes Heeb: First of all, ecological engineering should not be used as a top-down engineering concept. The consequent system orientation makes the involvement of all actors or stakeholders of a project necessary - from the very beginning of the project. A good ecological engineering project shall furthermore make consequent use of renewable resources, consider waste a resource and contribute to system stabilization. The target is to solve problems here and now and not shift them in time and space.

AS: IEES has been founded in 1993. How has Ecological Engineering changed since then?

Johannes Heeb: The scope of ecological engineering has become broader. IEES was founded by the "natural wastewater-treatment and wetland family". Today, ecological engineering is applied for landscape development (key issue of the New-Zealand conference in November 2001), city development, ecological building and planning, resource and energy management. etc.. The broad scope of ecological engineering is also reflected by the variety of information and articles we find on the IEES Homepage.

AS: What was your motivation to become IEES president and what were the goals you wanted and want to push as IEES president?

Johannes Heeb: Personally, I am very much interested in learning processes and concepts, particularly in organizational and inter-organizational learning. Our society brings together the experiences and knowledge of more than 150 members representing different institutions and cultures from countries all over the world.

Becoming the president of IEES provided me with a platform to contribute the development of an inter-institutional and inter-cultural learning process leading to a much more efficient use of the existing technical and methodical know-how in the field of ecological engineering and sustainable development.

This is also my main personal goal as the president of IEES. We hope to be able to launch in the next months a new internet-based project to improve the access to ecological engineering know-how not only for our members but also for every interested person on this planet.

AS: What were your personal highlights during these 8 years of your presidency? Do you like the job?

Johannes Heeb: To answer your second question first: Yes I like the job - the work for IEES does not only bring me into contact with interesting persons from all over the world, but motivates me to rethink my own way of working continuously. Working for IEES is for me not just a job but became part of my personal lifelong learning process.

Now, talking about highlights: The conferences in Sweden, Norway, China, Estonia, India, Nova Scotia and Switzerland were of course outstanding events in the last years. The conferences were in most of the cases the nucleus for follow-ups in form of new projects of new institutions.

This leads me to the next highlights: The start-ups of the Center for Ecological Engineering in Tartu (Estonia) and the Beijing Ecological Engineering Center. And last but not least: The IEES-Homepage. EcoEng-online (<http://www.iees.ch>) shows a high quality of information - thanks a lot Andreas for your tremendous contribution to this IEES-project.

AS: Has IEES been able to significantly promote the ideas of Ecological Engineering in the past?

Johannes Heeb: Yes, definitively, specifically via our international conferences, the follow-ups I mentioned, and our homepage which is visited by more than 1'200 persons every month.

AS: How long do you want to do that job?

Johannes Heeb: I would very much appreciate to transfer my job to a new person within the next two years. After 10 years a new person with new visions should proceed steering the IEES boat.

AS: Why should anyone become a IEES member?

Johannes Heeb: Everybody who is interested in ecological engineering and in becoming part of a referring world-wide learning and implementation platform should consider becoming member - a further incentive is of course, that all the members get a copy of Elseviers "Ecological Engineering" journal.

AS: Can you characterize the type of members IEES has?

Johannes Heeb: We have engineers, scientists, business people, teachers, etc. as our members. The variety of our member's professions is as large as our number of members - probably not accidentally since persons being willing to look for new and innovative development solutions seldomly fit into a predefined type profile.

AS: How many members does IEES have?

Johannes Heeb: At the moment we have about 150 Members.

AS: What kind of impulses might the next Ecological Engineering conference in NZ bring for the development of Ecological Engineering in NZ and worldwide?

Johannes Heeb: Sustainable landscape development, stakeholder participation and the role of ecological engineering will be the key issues of the conference. This provides ecological engineering with the great opportunity to show and prove its potential for planning and project implementation, integration of ecological, economical and social aspects.

AS: What is the importance of electronic media for IEES, e.g. the electronic extension of the next conference?

Johannes Heeb: I got lots of emails in the last months, from friends living in low salary countries asking for help to make it possible for them to participate at the conference. Unfortunately, IEES has no referring funds.

So I was very pleased to get support from Jacky Foo launching an electronical extension for the conference, thus making it at least possible for these people

to join the conference via internet. Of course it opens also the possibility to participate without contributing to CO₂-emissions by flying thousands of kilometers around the world.

AS: **Where do you see Ecological Engineering in 15 years from now?**

Johannes Heeb: Fortunately, I don't have the capability to look into the future. IEES will probably not be the main player in future world development. My hope is, that in 15 years from now we will be closer to a inter-cultural society knowing that sustainability can only be achieved if the big resource consumers are willing to stand back in order to open a development potential for the poor ones.

Even if ecological engineering will not play the key role, we are able to show that the necessary development concepts and technologies are available, not only 15 years from now but already today.

AS: **Johannes, thank you very much for this interview.**