

Vol 40 No 6
November 22, 2007

Frontpage

Classifieds

In Brief

News & Notes

Notable

Out and About

Papers & Presentations

Research

Student View

Next issue:
Dec. 13, 2007

Questions? Comments?
E-mail our editor.

Coastal project team negotiates its terms of research

by Leslie Vryenhoek



Dr. Svein Jentoft from the University of Tromso, Norway, makes his point while Dr. Ratana Chuenpagdee looks on.

An international team that's working to develop a more holistic approach to coastal issues held their first face-to-face meeting at Memorial University in October. For graduate students whose research will form part of the project, it was an eye-opening academic experience.

The project, led by Dr. Ratana Chuenpagdee, is called Coastal Connections: Interactive Governance Models for Sustainable Coastal Development. In assessing how to improve communities made vulnerable by natural and human-caused changes, it will take into account natural systems, social systems and governance systems.

"Interactive governance refers to an exploration of ways in which coastal actors, both private and public, participate in addressing coastal concerns by solving problems and creating opportunity," explained Dr. Chuenpagdee, the Canada Research Chair in Natural Resource Sustainability and Community Development.

Governance, Dr. Chuenpagdee stresses, is broader than management and goes beyond government. "We're talking about learning and about sharing responsibility. It has to involve other actors as well."

During their three days together, the team, which includes Memorial's Dr. Barbara Neis, Dr. Svein Jentoft from the University of Tromso, Norway, Dr. Derek Johnson from the University of Manitoba and Dr. Rashid Sumaila from UBC, discussed the terms of their project – how governability should be defined, for example, and what instruments and measures could be included in assessing governability.

Graduate students were on hand for much of that complex discussion – a crucial part of their academic training. "We think we have the answers, but then we

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- Grenfell student shares experiences from print shop co-op placement
- Taking pleasure in teaching
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- Shad Memorial takes cup
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play around with the questions. That's an important part of research, so it's good for the students to be part of it," said Dr. Chuenpagdee.

Dr. Sumaila explained to the students that they should learn to think in terms of "research as negotiation."

Andrew Song is one of the master's students involved in Coastal Connections. He said he found this first project meeting both confusing and enlightening.

"This was the first time I was in a meeting like this where professors were discussing ideas. At times I was thinking 'where is this discussion going?'" he recalled. "By the end, things got quite clear."

While Mr. Song's thesis is still a work in progress, he believes he now has a better idea of what he'll be looking for as he conducts research into fisheries governance, which will take him to Malawi. Mr. Song will be studying governability – what can be governed, and what can't be controlled in the complex socio-economics of a coastal community.

"I'll be identifying some components of the fishery and the natural ecosystem, trying to understand the current model and looking for insights into how we can use that to foster more effective and sustainable fisheries policies."

Other students participating in the project are Ahmed Khan and Jessica Kukac. Mr. Khan, who is pursuing his PhD, will be looking at governance of coastal management areas in this province, focusing particularly on examining economic incentives and policy instruments leading to resource sustainability and community resilience. Ms. Kukac's master's research on understanding community values and implications on sustainable development will be conducted in coastal communities around St. Paul's Inlet, NL, on the west coast, and will intersect, as this entire project does, with the CURA-funded project that Dr. Barbara Neis, Sociology, is leading.

Coastal Connections received \$136,000 in research funding from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) this year.

[Top](#) ❖