

The First FEM Semester – A Retrospective

By Philipp Walter, FEM 2010 Student

From the outside, the building of the forestry faculty looks like a mixture of a castle, a fort, a storage building and it kind of has some similarities to the prison, a few meters down the street. I was standing in front of that thing realizing that this place would be my point of reference for the next two years... With time these associations proved to contain some truth: I would feel like a king in his castle, having the honor of studying at one of the few “elite universities” of Germany. Out of this fort I would have to defend myself against the countless temptations of Freiburg which can distract you from your studies. I would benefit from the stacks of knowledge being stored in this building, which is renowned for being one of the best institutes for studying forestry in Germany, the traditional home of Forestry. But also I would be trapped there for endless hours of studying, feeling like a prisoner, with probably similar food quality considering the stuff they are serving us sometimes at the Mensa.

New students get their first impression of the FEM program through the introductory days which are mainly lead by Esther. Being the irreplaceable good soul and coordinator of the FEM program, Esther Muschelknautz welcomed us to the university, introduced us to organizational details, and helped us to get to know each other, as well as how to approach the cultural diversity



Module “Tree Structure and Function”

of our fellow students. In the progress of the semester we realized what an important and beneficial aspect of the program this diversity is. It was amazing to see how our “FEMily” (as we lovingly call our FEM 2010 group. Our new guy from Sweden coined the term FEMale, which resulted in quite some skeptical remarks by a bunch of fellow students...) was developing into this collection of very engaged and caring fellow students which would make most meetings, if in class or during free time, a joyful and inspiring occasion. Through this program I have the pleasure of having friends in Korea, Australia, India, Nepal, Ukraine, Romania, Italy, Netherlands, UK, Sweden, USA, Canada, Peru and Venezuela, not to mention the contacts we make by meeting people from the other international programs in the faculty (MEG, REM). Rich diversity is evident not only in the cultural but also the different professional backgrounds of our group. Approaching new ideas from the different perspectives of environmental science, zoology, biology, ecology, production engineering, landscape architecture, horticulture science, physical geography and political science backgrounds, led to some very interesting discussions within our group.

After nice get-togethers during introductory days the program got down to business by opening with scientific perspectives on current environmental changes worldwide in the module "Global Environmental Changes" (GEC). The whole FEM program is structured into three weeks modules which allow you to focus on one topic very intensively without having to repeat the stuff you have heard in a lecture a half a year ago for the exam. GEC was one of my favorite modules of the first semester since it offered a vast spectrum of lectures, giving insights into most of the important environmental challenges going on in the world right now. Since GEC was attended by MEG as well as FEM students we got to know right away our "social science counterparts".

More basic and forest focused knowledge supplied the following "Tree Structure and Function" module. As a forestry undergraduate there was lots of repetition involved for me but also lots of new and more detailed knowledge e.g. about plant physiology. Long and frustrating hours we spent in front of the uni computers juggling with data and graphs in "Applied Environmental Statistics" (AES). But the assistance by the module staff was fantastic so in the end most of us had decent skills in this passionless but so important topic (which we would never have expected in the first place).

Following AES we were able to chose between the modules "Forest and Water" and "Agro- and Farm Forestry" (AFF) elective module. Together with a bunch of fellow students I chose AFF and since the responsible professor was working abroad we had to approach AFF by self-study. Even though the topic is very interesting, working mostly alone was by far less interesting and less fruitful than the discussions we had in actual lectures led by an experienced expert. Luckily, the following module "Managing Human Environmental Interactions" (MHEI) was the total contrast. Being by far the most intense, stressful but also the most inspiring module I attended in this semester, we approached the relationship between humans and its environment by using all educational methods you can possibly think of. The semester ended a bit more smoothly but with the same high standard in another elective module. I decided for "Plantation Forestry" even though it was a tough one to decide against "Forests and Climate Change" as the alternative. After getting the theoretical basis of forest plantations through some very interesting lectures in the first week, the rest of the module was designated for some intense and practical relevant group work.



Module "Managing Human Environmental Interactions"



Christmas Party

Even though the professional benefit was enormous, the main highlight of my first FEM semester was my fellow students. It seems like this program is a melting pot for great, engaged, open-minded people who love to interact with others with all kinds of cultural and professional backgrounds. Since the very start of the semester we were enjoying each others company at self-organized international dinners, bonfires, hikes, snowboarding or cross-country skiing days, christmas market visits, flash mobs against nuclear

power, cricket games against the MEGs and even easter egg painting. These activities were lots of fun but also precious concerning what I learned by just being around my multicultural fellow students and concerning the network of worldwide contacts all of us are gaining. For now it seems like the FEMily activities will be even more frequent in the upcoming summer so we are already worrying about how we are supposed to focus on the professional part of the studies with all the possible distraction luring us.



FEM Cricket Team