“Sustainability” abounds these days. From sustainable eye care to sustainable doghouses, it’s probably impossible to go a day without encountering the buzzword. But underlying the hype are real, escalating ecological crises such as climate change, deforestation, and pollution, raising serious questions about how we can change our behaviour and design our communities so as to reduce our impact on the environment. People in this Department spend a lot of time thinking about issues related to sustainability, however we may define this elusive term.

Recognizing ecological concerns, the City of Vancouver launched its EcoDensity initiative in November 2006 with the objective to enhance ecological sustainability, liveability and affordability in our city. Apart from the catchy name, which could no doubt have come straight from the desk of the country’s top marketing agencies, EcoDensity promises to deliver planning-related policy tools to tackle urban issues related to sprawl, automobile use and housing affordability among other laudable goals. Increasing development densities is a primary tool toward that end.

The City is currently hosting a series of workshops to inform and receive comments from the public. Markus Moos, a graduate student in our Department and the chair of the Geography Sustainability Committee, saw a unique opportunity for the Department to contribute its varied expertise to a local project that will likely have enormous consequences for Vancouver’s communities.

On February 11th, emeritus, faculty and undergraduate and graduate students met with Thor Kuhman, a City staff member, to do just that. In a series of short presentations, participants offered supportive but cautionary comments on the City’s plans. Professor Emeritus Tim Oke endorsed densification but voiced his concern about potential ensuing ecological impacts on local evaporation, air temperature and permeability. Markus Moos illustrated that city design matters for consumption, but cautioned that the often assumed one-to-one relationship between density and reduced consumption is complicated by cultural factors, community practices and attitudes. Finally, Rowan Arundel, Emma Hume and Jane Koh, three undergraduate students in Dr. Kathrine Richardson’s Urban Field Study course (Geography 447), highlighted their concerns regarding democratic decision-making and community participation based on densification projects in Vancouver’s Norquay neighbourhood village.

All forum attendees who spoke agreed that densification is an important part of a more sustainable city, but many were concerned that densification is perhaps just a profit-raising strategy for developers. Graduate student Pablo Mendez emphasised that density is not necessarily related to affordability due to complexities related to tenure, income and other housing market factors. Others were worried about the impact on an already thinly stretched public transportation system. Several forum members called on the City to go beyond its seeming preoccupation with built form to include social, cultural and ecological dimensions in their plans.

As the EcoDensity vision moves into more specific policy targets, it will be interesting to see whether and how the buzzwords, which graduate student Nick Lynch worried may be devoid of meaning, are translated into action. As various comments at the forum are any indication, sustainability will require a truly inter-disciplinary effort drawing on expertise across traditionally defined fields of study. Geography may have a unique role to play in this process, and we should explore it further. To submit comments or learn more about EcoDensity visit www.vancouver-ecodensity.ca.

Check out GEOG @ UBC on the web:  http://www.geog.ubc.ca/departments/newsletters

GEOG @ UBC would like to thank everyone who submitted pieces for the newsletter. Please continue to support GEOG @ UBC by submitting your stories and ideas to Katie Kinsley kinsley@geog.ubc.ca

The University of British Columbia
The Department of Geography

Urban Observations from Japan

By: Ian D. Stewart

We peered curiously from the window of our train as it meandered through a scatter of traditional homes, orchards, factories, paddy fields, and apartment buildings on Tokyo’s distant outskirts. Bemused by the complexity of the landscape, my supervisor (Professor Oke) and I wondered aloud if it was, by Japanese standards, “urban” or “rural.” Sitting across from us were our guides for the day, Yamashita-sensei and his doctoral candidate, both devoted urban climatologists from Tokyo Ga- kugei University. We had expected a clear reaction to our critical question, but instead the sensei and his student were visibly perplexed, as though there were no easy answer.

This brief but intriguing encounter with the sensei and the Japanese landscape was the first of many I would have in the weeks to come. On November 8 of last year, I arrived in Northeast Asia for a one-month research excursion. The purpose of my visit was to document firsthand the local surroundings at some of the better-known measurement sites used in published assessments of urban temperature bias in the cities of Tokyo, Nagano, Kyoto, Sendai, and Seoul. Climatologists traditionally define “urban” and “rural” through simple and simultaneous comparison of so-called urban and rural temperature-time series. Not so simple, and certainly not universal, is the ambiguous classification of these series as either “urban” or “rural.” Perhaps nowhere on earth is this dichotomy more diluted than on the vast alluvial plain surrounding Tokyo.

Clutching a map, a camera, and pencil and paper, I ventured north, south, and west across the Kanto Plain in search of that urban-rural divide so ingrained in Western models of urbanization. It was nowhere in sight. I soon conceded that a quick escape—even by bullet train—from Tokyo’s urban grip is impossible, only because there is no definitive border with its hinterland. I had instead found the new “region-based urbanism,” the “Asian megacity of the global economy,” that I’d read and heard so much about. Two years ago in my doctoral prospectus, I argued that urban climatology needs a new local-scale landscape classification model, one which parts way with subjective and simplistic assessments of climate stations and their measurements as either “urban” or “rural.” The new model, I insisted, should offer multidimensional and “climatologically” relevant measures of a station’s environment. How tall and tightly spaced are the surface objects? How much of the surface cover is artificial or vegetative? What are the thermal and radiative properties of that cover? In a rapidly urbanizing world of borderless and patchwork cities—like Tokyo—the answers to these questions are no longer as intuitive as they once were. Urban climatologists have no choice now but to re-evaluate their long-standing paradigm for space classification.

As the train pulled into futuristic Shinjuku terminal in downtown Tokyo, the four of us jumped to our feet to avoid the crush of commuters behind us. On the station platform, we thanked our guides for a fascinating journey through Tokyo’s dynamic landscape continuum. The sensei appeared uneasy with the day’s accomplishments, perhaps feeling a loss of face for not making the urban-rural distinction perfectly clear to his Western colleagues. This was no loss of face: we had unfairly asked him to characterize a diverse Japanese landscape with a crude and unfamiliar construct. This was no loss of face: we had unfairly asked him to characterize a diverse Japanese landscape with a crude and unfamiliar construct. In response, his reticence spoke volumes about the cultural, historical, and geographical nuances of settlement space. And this space is exactly what I had come to see. It was a lesson learned, and from that moment my research inched forward, better informed, and better understood.
Sabbatical Stories: Lessons Learned

By Greg Henry

Sabbaticals – a wonderful time for contemplation, rejuvenation, research and, in my case, project administration. When properly planned and executed, these periods can provide the first three of the attributes mentioned above for the academic career and for the family. On Sally Husbands showed in her article in the November issue. My sabbatical began in a tumultuous year of change for me, personally and professionally.

Getting used to a new family situation and establishing and coordinating two major research projects in the International Polar Year (IPY) occupied most of the year. The IPY (2007-2009) is a two-year period of intense research in both polar regions with research projects supported by over 60 countries. This unique idea follows the history of international polar research with major projects occurring roughly every 50 years since 1882-1883. I led two proposals for the IPY in Canada, and both were successful. In the largest project ($7 million over five years), 32 researchers in universities, government and northern communities are studying tundra ecosystems and their potential for change across Canada. These assessments are related to the International Tundra Experiment (ITEX), which is an IPY core project I lead at the international level. Much of the year was spent establishing the projects, getting people in place, planning and holding meetings, and dealing with funding and reporting. A very exciting time for research in the Arctic, although a steep learning curve for someone not trained in management of large research projects!

If you stay in Vancouver during a sabbatical, colleagues know you are around and “available.” The Northern Scientific Training Program (NSTP), a program within Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, provides funding for graduate and senior undergraduate students for field research in the Canadian North. The program is administered at UBC by the Polar and Alpine Research Committee (PARC), which I have chaired since 1998. As none of the committee members in PARC were willing to take on the NSTP role, I was pressed into service to ensure that 24 student applications met all the requirements and reports from 19 students funded in 2006 were in order. A rather onerous task made more difficult by an uncooperative web-based process, which consumed much of November. For my next sabbatical, I will be out of town.

While the IPY projects occupied much of my sabbatical time, I did manage to get away for some research trips. September found me in northern Scandinavia participating in a project to test the quality of birch seeds at timberline sites along gradients from coastal to inland sites. It was a wonderful way to see northern Norway and Sweden. In February, I attended the ITEX Workshop in Falls Creek, a ski resort north of Melbourne, Australia, on the Bogong High Plains. Yes, there is “tundra” in the Australian Alps although it is just perched on the tops of mountains. With this in mind, I attended an IPY meeting in Tromsø, Norway on treeline dynamics and then stayed as a guest of the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research. I actually managed to get some writing done, while planning another IPY meeting to be held in Vancouver in May. Other highlights last year included the successful PhD defense by Rebecca Zalatan in late September, and completion of the M.Sc. program by Rebecca Kladny in October.

I look forward to the next sabbatical leave, when I will disappear to write up results from the IPY research!

Featured Geographer: David Ley

Initially, David Ley did not want to study Geography, he wanted to study History. Although he seems to be genetically predisposed to the field (with degrees in geography, history and psychology), this discouraged him from pursuing a career in the academic world. Born in Swansea, Wales, David lived in the UK until he completed his BA and then “undertook a 12-month adventure in North America to attend Carleton University in Ottawa.” Once he completed his degree in 1972 he moved to Vancouver and took a position at UBC.

The reason: “I was told that Vancouver had cool, damp weather like England and that I could play cricket there!” In fact, as David clearly discovered, “Vancouver had a lot more going on for it than that.”

David’s research centers on urban and social geography. He has written a number of books among them Neighbourhood Organizations and the Welfare State (with Shlomo Hasson), a study of the history of urban social research in Canada. His latest book, The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City, examines gentrification in six Canadian cities. He is currently working on another book, Mills, началля潮流: Trans-Pacific Life Lines about wealthy immigrants who moved to Toronto and Vancouver from 1886 onwards. During his time at UBC David has received numerous accolades for his high quality research, including nomination as a Pierre Trudeau Foundation Fellow (2003-06). Yet, David describes “teaching and research, encouraging colleagues and students that the everyday experience of people and place is a topic of immense value and depth – with ramifications into public policy” as his greatest achievement. Reflective of this commitment, David was awarded the Faculty of Graduate Studies Killam Prize for graduate teaching in (1998-99). Grad student Jonathon Clifton describes David as a “brilliant lecturer”, while Justin Tse states “I really look up to him as an academic mentor.”

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Something you may not know about David is that he is “one of the many geographers who are also sports nuts. I play tennis twice a week, and spend more time than I should with the NHL and EPL.” He has also been a Bob Dylan fan since the 1960s and adds that “earlier was better!”

Congratulations Karen and Philippe!

In a world that continues to be plagued by violent conflict, the sagacity of Dorothy Killam’s wish, in 1965, that the Killam Trusts, would “develop and expand the work of Canadian Universities” and also “promote sympathetic understanding between Canadians and the peoples of other countries,” has only become more pronounced. Among the awards established from these trusts are the UBC Killam Faculty Research Fellowships. Open to any UBC faculty member on leave, these fellowships provide a maximum of $15,000 as salary replacement and an allowance for use during a one-year study leave. The most recent recipients of these awards include Karen Bakker and Philippe Le Billon.

Philippe’s research will assess the record of resource reforms and the new political economy of resource sectors in Africa. According to Philippe, the resolution of many conflicts over the past five years combined with a commodity boom involving high levels of foreign investment has sparked much optimism for Africa’s socio-economic development. Yet, studies of past experiences are casting a shadow on this optimism. Arguments about ‘resource curse’ and ‘resource wars’ suggest that peace may be short-lived and that the boom may fail to deliver a broadly shared benefit. These concerns are mind, peacebuilding agendas are gaining increased attention to resource reforms. While studying these reforms and their context, Philippe will be based at the Centre d’Études de Recherches Internationales and will travel to several African countries.

Questions of resource governance will also form the foundation of Karen’s research. The recent proposal to create a transboundary management system for waterways between Canada and the US has raised many concerns. In order to explore the efficacy of this system for North America, Karen will be conducting a comparative study of transboundary water governance. The study will draw heavily on European experience, where the majority of river basins have a transboundary committee that is multinational and responsible for water pollution, regulation and consulting with citizens. Karen’s work will also speak to current debates in Geography on scale, borders, globalization and security in a post-9/11 world. The fellowship will also enable Karen to collaborate with French colleagues at the renowned Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique to address issues of social theory and urbanization, a new direction for Karen.