

The Oman Water Challenge: Royal Wetskills 2012

In the framework of the State Visit of HM Queen Beatrix to Oman **Prof. Dr. Ruud J. Schotting, Sultan Qaboos Chair of Quantitative Water Management at Utrecht University/ Roosevelt Academy**, was invited to Oman to assist with the Wetskills competition. The Academic Chair is an initiative of the Netherlands-Oman Foundation and its industrial supporters that funded its first four years. Prof. Schotting reports.



Princess Máxima and Queen Beatrix meet students who participated in the Wetskills Water Challenge; Prof. Dr. Ruud Schotting stands in the back. (Credits: ONA)

Wetskills is a famous intercultural student competition, which has been held already five times at a variety of places all over the world, e.g. Shanghai, Jakarta, Casablanca and Amsterdam. The Ambassador of the Netherlands in Oman, H.E. Stefan van Wersch, came up with the idea to organize a Wetskills competition in conjunction with the visit of the Dutch Royal Family to Oman early January 2012. Indeed a splendid idea, because Oman and the Netherlands collaborate a lot with respect to water-related issues. The subtitle of this edition of Wetskills was: "The Oman Water Challenge".

The concept of Wetskills is quite simple: ten Omani students and ten Dutch students work during a short time-span intensively in five mixed teams, i.e. each team consists of two

Omani and two Dutch students, to come up with 'out-of-the-box' solutions for urgent water problems in Oman. As holder of one of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Academic Chairs, I was asked to define five water-related problems in Oman, and moreover, to provide ten Dutch students. As Saxion University of Applied Sciences and Utrecht University Faculty of Geosciences are both involved in a 2g@there project funded by the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs (Agentschap NL), it seemed logical to involve five Saxion and five Utrecht University students. The expertise of the Saxion student is typically related to water technology, while the expertise of the Utrecht University students focuses at water resources in a geosciences context. For this competition a perfect match! Professor Ahmed Salim Al-Busaidi of Sultan Qaboos

University in Muscat arranged the Omani students, in general students that recently graduated from SQU.

We selected five regions in Oman that have their own typical water-related problems: Muscat (urban area, wastewater, flash floods, desalination), Al Batinah and Al Hajar Mountains (flash floods, agriculture, wadis, seawater intrusion), desert (oil production in conjunction with the production of contaminated and highly saline water, water scarcity), Dhofar (green region, agriculture, recharge) and Sohar (urban and harbor area, industry, cooling water, waste water).

January 1st, 2012 the Dutch students flew to Oman, including their supervisors Janneke Duiven (Vitens) and Lars Koens (Saxion). The first two days were devoted to teambuilding and getting to know each other. Not only water-related sites were visited but also historic, religious and cultural places. Already during these first two days the atmosphere between the Omani and Dutch students was vibrant! Twenty highly motivated students ready for the Wetskills competition. January 3rd they went to Sohar where the actual competition started. It was not an easy start: no Internet in the hotel.... Janneke told the students: "The competition will be full of problems and obstacles: this is one of them!" Fortunately this problem was solved in no time, so the actual battle could begin.

Actually, the students had only very little time to come up with their 'out-of-the-box' solutions. The final presentations for the jury had to take place January 10th, 2012. The presentations consisted of a so-called 'elevator pitch' of 120 seconds and a full-size poster with details about their solution(s). As Chairman of the jury, I can assure you that we had a very difficult time to select a winning idea. Without any exception the level of the presented ideas was extremely high. Finally, the Dhofar team won.

Next day, early January 11th, we left for Port of Sohar Free Zone, where at 11:00 Her Majesty Queen Beatrix, His Royal Highness Prince Willem Alexander and Her Royal Highness Princess Máxima arrived to meet representatives of the Dutch Water Sector, and moreover attend the awarding ceremony of the Wetskills Oman Water Challenge 2012. It was a real honor for me to welcome the Royal Family and say a few words about the importance of the collaboration between Oman and The Netherlands with respect to water issues and water education. Two students gave a 100 seconds pitch to explain what the Oman Wetskills is all about and we awarded the winning Dhofar team. 'Catch me if you can' was the subtitle of the winning idea: a highly intelligent combination of classical water catching and saving options.

Her Majesty, as well as the Prince and the Princess, really showed interest in the five poster presentations by the students. They posed many questions and the students enjoyed the discussions with the Royal Family. Afterwards, during lunch, Her Majesty told me: "I could tell by their faces that they were really proud of what they have accomplished. Moreover, they all acted as real teams." I am convinced that the Wetskills competition has added something valuable to the visit of our Royal Family to Oman. The key of building better understanding between different cultures is in

the hands of young people. Young people that are eager to learn from each other, are open-minded and go for the out-of-the-box intercultural friendships.

I want to thank Johan Oost, Director of Wetskills and Janneke Duiven for their great organizing skills and pleasant company! I was really fortunate to be part of this unique event, a Royal event full of smiling faces.

Prof. Dr. Ruud Schotting proclaimed 'Best Professor 2011' at Utrecht University

During a ceremony at Utrecht University Prof. Dr. Ruud Schotting, Holder of the Sultan Qaboos Academic Chair for Quantitative Water Management, received the 'Best Professor 2011 Prize' for his highly valued and successful research and his passionate teaching. Prof. Schotting, who attended the ceremony via an internet video conference while he was in Oman for the State Visit, is among others praised for the way in which he teaches mathematics at the Geosciences department, explaining difficult differential equations with humor, personal attention (he knows practically all of his students by name) and examples that many students can easily relate to (such as the speed at which a bottle of beer cools down).

The prize equally lauds Prof. Schotting's clear stance and ideas on education, which he also likes to propagate: last year for example he was quoted in national news media when pleading for the improvement of pupils' basic math skills. In this framework he established a Summer School for pupils who wanted to brush up their math proficiency.

Prof. Schotting is furthermore commended for the way in which he stimulates students to think clever, creatively and independently and to develop a scientific attitude. He knows how to enthuse students and actively involve them in the learning process, also by introducing them to the field through (international) traineeships and excursions. In 2011 for example, a group of students under the guidance of Prof. Schotting visited Oman in the framework of an 'Excursion to Companies Abroad'.

The Sultan Qaboos Academic Chair for Quantitative Water Management is an initiative of the Netherlands-Oman Foundation to honour H.M. the Sultan of Oman who has led his nation to prosperity and has allowed all Omanis, including women, to improve their lives through (university) education. The Academic Chair in its first four years has been supported by PA International Foundation, C. Steinweg Handelsveem B.V., Intercontinental Hotels Group, Schelde Naval Shipbuilding and Shell Representative Office Oman and co-sponsored by Alcan Inc., Vitol Holding B.V. and Van Oord.