Image: Preparing compost.

Image: Planing a vineyard.

Local Soil Knowledge

of conventional and organic farmers in Western Styria and Southern Burgenland (Austria)

Sebastian Wahlhütter*

Working Group for Knowledge Systems and Innovations, Division of Organic Farming, Department for Sustainable Agricultural Systems, BOKU, Vienna
Department of Folklore and Cultural Anthropology, KFU, Graz; E-Mail: sebastian.wahlhuetter@gmail.com

Introduction

Knowledge about soil is embedded in a society's social memory, e.g. in social networks, agricultural methods, evaluation of soil quality, religious believe systems, economic strategies and more. As a matter of fact this knowledge can provide useful information in terms of environmental conservation, sustainable agriculture and resource management as well as it can give cultural and ecological insights.

The two Austrian regions of Western Styria and Southern Burgenland differ from each other not only in geophysical but also in cultural, economical or historical aspects. Furthermore there are different farming systems (e.g. organic, conventional) all bringing in different attitudes, values, cultivation methods and other soil related knowledge. The project provides a better understanding of farmers perception of soil and contributes to preservation of local knowledge and innovation of agricultural farming methods.

Objectives

The project aims

o to document and characterize local soil knowledge possessed by farmers (e.g. treatment of soil, perception of soil, role of religious belief systems, economic factors or social networks)

o to contrast the local soil knowledge of two Austrian regions as well as the local soil knowledge of different groups within a culture (e.g. different farming systems).

o to give an explanation for the occurrence of differences in this local knowledge system (e.g. cultural and historical differences geographical and geophysical aspects).

Major topics are: language, specially manifested in local terms used to describe soil and farm land, the role of (religious) belief systems, generation and gender aspects, perception of soil related changes in the environment, strategies in treatment and handling of soils or the relevance of (scientific) key concepts as 'soil fertility' in every day life and others.

Images: Clearing weed (left) and fieldside cross (right) .

Image: Former way of setting potatoes.

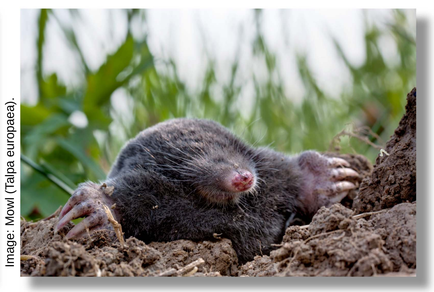

Image: Mowl (Talpa europaea).

Image: Harrowing a field.

Image: Building up a vineyard.

Figure: Local Soil Knowledge as a complex network of relations.

Methods

The project is based on qualitative data research gained out of semi structured interviews done with farmers in the districts of Jennersdorf and Güssing in Southern Burgenland (n=34) and the district Deutschlandsberg in Western Styria (n=64**). Informants were interviewed in two research phases from November 2009 until September 2010. In addition to the more open questions there have been also structured interview parts in combination with ratings and rankings. Participant observation took place during the whole field research.

Ethnopedology

Ethnopedology, the science about local soil knowledge is highly interdisciplinary and situated on the link between natural science, social science and humanities. As a quite young discipline, most of the ethnopedological studies done so far are dealing with regions and cultures outside of Europe mainly in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Due to that fact a further aim of the project is to put the focus of the ethnopedological discourse also on the own so called "western culture" in order to gain new insights and to prevent local knowledge from cultural erosion.

Image: potato plough.

Image: Drilling holes for vine.

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