

Astrid Björnsen Gurung



Research topics and role within SCCER

Dr. Astrid Björnsen Gurung is Coordinator of the Research Program 'Energy Change Impact' (ECI), a joint activity of the Swiss Federal Research Institute WSL and the Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology Eawag. She is member of the Advisory Board of the SCCER BIOSWEET and initiated a Working Group on Knowledge and Technology Transfer with representatives from all SCCERs, NRPs 70 and 71 and other relevant initiatives. Astrid is a relentless analyst, synthesizer and addicted networker. Her current research interests cover various sources of renewable energy and the anticipated impacts of resource use on the environment, landscape, economy and society.

Biography, carrier path

After her graduation in Environmental Sciences at ETH Zurich, Astrid spent several years in Nepal and Indonesia working with bugs & people. After reloading her batteries doing a Master of Advanced Studies ETH in 'Development and Cooperation' she pursued her dream of doing applied action research in remote Himalayan villages that finally yielded a PhD at ETH. After her return to Switzerland, she devoted more than a decade to international research coordination working as a program manager for the Mountain Research Initiative office in Bern. Late 2014, the WSL appointed Astrid to launch and coordinate the 'Energy Change Impact' (ECI) Research Program encompassing numerous projects at WSL and Eawag in the field of energy transition and impact research.

As a pleasant side effect of the years abroad, Astrid shares her home with three himalaya x helvetica-Species of 10, 12 and 14 years and husband (100% Species nepalensis).

What do you find fascinating about the energy transition

The provocative role the ECI Program is playing when pointing at critical processes or resource uses that could trigger unwanted effects. I really like the idea of using our skills and

models to make predictions of future land uses or water availability. This 'future outlook' can enable decision makers to steer the energy transition in the right direction.

I am equally fascinated – but occasionally also scared, indeed "SCCERed" - by the complexity of the energy system and the fact that the entire world's community is part of a global, multifaceted experiment, that must imperatively succeed.

And the SCCER program?

Collaboration is a prerequisite for the energy transition, be it at the national or global scale. The SCCER BIOSWEET - but equally all other SCCERs - enables the Swiss research community to generate collective knowledge that is necessary to tackle the before mentioned complexity. These programs invite researchers to leave their comfort zones, which is definitely a good thing I am fully supportive of. Yet, I also believe that inter- and transdisciplinary research requires more time than currently granted by the funders. In the same vein, knowledge and technology transfer is a long process. Everybody is talking about harvesting 'low hanging fruits' these days. I hope that the funding institutions have patience also to wait for high-value fruits on the top of the tree that require more maturing time.

Is your research field equilibrated (men-women)?

No, of course not. But the root cause is not in science or the particular discipline but rather in the way we raise girls and boys.

Recommendations for young women wishing to pursue a career in the energy field?

My advice to my 10-years old daughter: (1) Be explorative (play lego and dismantle the radio, don't go for playmobil or Barbie); (2) get to know your own ambitions and follow them, and (3) learn to say "No". Don't be the nice girl trying to please everybody.

My advice to my 22-years old niece studying at ETH: (1) build up your network and benefit from mentoring programs; (2) never feel guilty once you have to split time for family and work life; (3) get rid of perfectionism.

Your „work-balance“ recipe?

For my mind the old principle applies: Do the right things and do things right.

For my body: chocolate and coffee.

Interview: Simone Nanzer (SCCER BIOSWEET), July 2016