Erik NÃ¦sset

Description

A conversation with Erik

My first trip to Norway is going to last just one day. I took a flight to cloudy Oslo and continued with train to the town of Ã s, where Erik NÃ¦sset, 2011 yearÂ´s prize winner, was expecting me. Erik turns on his Swede-adjusted accent and we start the interview.

During your presentation at the symposium in Stockholm last year, you showed a time line of the airborne laser technology. What has happened since then?

Well, the technology is better established on the market and the Canadian market is looking advantageous. But no dramatic changes. The technology is rather costly to introduce and the markets in Brazil and America are less open than the European market, making it harder to establish foreign companies and technologies. But of course, there is the possibility to use the technology for climate control and large-scale surveillance of, for example, rain forest deforestation.

How about improving Google Maps?

Yes, but then you would need to use satellite lasers and not planes.

If you let your mind run wild, what would be the most fascinating application? How far do you think we can stretch this technology?

It could be what you just mentioned. Surveillance on a regional, national and global scale with high frequency in time. Today we are using air planes for this technology, which is time demanding and expensive. There are of course many advantages to placing the laser source in space, but it would demand much development of the existing technology.

If we look back on your time as a PhD student, how have things changed compared to this day and age?

Totally different! I submitted my written thesis to my supervisor along with a few manuscripts in Norwegian. Got a couple of comments, and that was it. I had the formal training and courses, but no guidance from my supervisor so I learnt all I needed to know on my own. My PhD students are more productive and they work in teams. They also need to publish in international journals and the audience is international and not local or Scandinavian as it tended to be 20-30 years ago. I was one of the first in my generation in Norway who tried to publish internationally. I donÂ´t know how long I worked with the manuscript, but it took years before they accepted it! The quality of the work is much higher today, but maybe at the expense of independence.

When I was planning my trip to Norway, I asked Erik to choose a meeting place at which he felt most comfortable and at home. He chose his office at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, where he conducted his MasterÂ´s and later doctoral studies.

How is it that you came to do your PhD here at Ã s?

I always enjoyed math and physics, and when I started studying here I realized how exciting the field of forestry really is â?? and in particular forest inventory and monitoring of natural resources! It was statistics and biology and physics and all the things I liked. But after my Masters here in Ã s I thought â?? No, never again here! It was too rural for me. So I moved to Oslo and worked five years at the research department of the Central Bureau of Statistics, mostly together with economists. And then I realized that I had to get back to my own discipline to find new challenges,, moved back and started my PhD here.

But what if it actually turned out the way you said, never again in Ã s?

Yes, life is really a series of random eventsâ?¦

How important is it to know what you want in life career-wise?

No, not so important. I have based my choices on interest and intuition.

Money?

No, that has never been a great motivator. If it were, I would have become a civil engineer, physics and engineering was one of the other disciplines that attracted me when I graduated from high school. I find satisfaction in the challenges of my work. In my job I combine all of my interests: statistics, physics, biology. ItÂ´s fantastic!

If you could go back in time, would you have chosen the same education and career path as you did?

I am 100 per cent happy with the way things turned out. But had I made other choices, perhaps it would have been just as fine! There is not only one option in life.

In your acceptance speech you mention your father. He said that Sweden is always 10 years ahead of you (Norway). Do you still believe this?

My father got his education in Sweden in the early 1950s and always thought everything was a little second class here compared to Sweden. You should also keep in mind that he spent much of his professional career in various industries. Norway has never had the same industrial strength as Sweden but has to a large extent relied on extraction of its natural resources. That is historically our economic foundation. But I would say the levels have planed out now.

Do you know Fredrik Skavlan? He has become popular in Sweden recently with his tv show, Skavlan. In one episode they discuss how Swedish people to work in Norway and do low level

work, like peeling bananas. So the situation is maybe the opposite your fatherâ??s in the fiftyâ??s?

You can tell, especially in Oslo in the restaurant business. You hear Swedish everywhere! My father has always had work here, but in his time Norway had little capital. We had the fishing industry, but the paradigm shift came with the oil. Of course, a great part of the Norwegian manpower goes to the oil industry, which is rather complex and research intensive. Still, Sweden has a long tradition of refining its natural resources that Norway lacks. ItÂ´s harder to build a car or an electronic device than to scoop up a cod from the sea, but yet there has been a tremendous and amazing growth over the last 40 years in very profitable engineering and construction industries related to all aspects of oil production.