Knowledge enables action

If you want to keep track of the jungle of international laws and conventions on environmental protection, Zoï Environment Network is the right place to start. The non-profit organization is a hub of environmental knowledge. Zoï employees analyse environmental data, and communicate the findings and implications to political leaders and the general public in easily understood language and in the context of whatever other relevant circumstances may be in play.

It is quite possible that Greta Thunberg has studied Zoï’s publications to understand climate change, its causes and global impact. Political leaders, officials and financial actors have certainly done so for a long time because they trust Zoï to transform complex environmental analyses into accessible knowledge. While the content of Zoï publications is serious, the 17 collaborators communicate their findings in attractive illustrated publications that are energetic and hopeful, worried and caring at the same time – Zoï and Thunberg are similar in this respect as well. The big difference is that almost everyone knows the young Swede – whereas practically no one knows Zoï Environment Network. This is due to the fact that Zoï may work for the big players – the UN, the World Bank, the Swiss and other governments, and in a very transparent way – but it always remains in the background.

The founders of Zoï, Otto Simonett, Nickolai Denisov and Claudia Heberlein, met in Norway, where all three worked for a branch of the UN Environment Programme. In 2008 they became independent – with the UN city of Geneva as a base. The language spoken at work is English, and the collaborators live all over the world. Until the end of 2020, Susan Boos, editor of the WOZ, was president of Zoï.

Environmental protection is conflict prevention

Zoï is convinced that today's environmental problems are precursors to tomorrow's conflicts. This insight starts with the idea that the state of the environment is a primary determinant of our living conditions. To take one example, when environmental degradation leads to rural-to-urban migration, and then the lack of jobs in the cities leads to disaffection, conflict may follow. Interventions to improve the environment can improve our living conditions and preclude the instability that might otherwise follow. Director Otto Simonett: “We know out of experience: If the environment is in better shape, human beings are too.”

Zoï works with various means and communication tools, and appealing infographics are one of their specialties. Recently, they created a poster for InforMEA – the United Nations Information portal on Multilateral Environmental Agreements. The infographic shows the multitude of environmental treaties, the set of rules on which states have reached legally binding agreements: the conventions on climate and atmosphere, chemicals and waste, environmental management, soil, agriculture, biodiversity and marine and freshwater.

In addition to highly visual publications, Zoï also produces films. And they also engage on the ground, a kind of diplomatic service in the context of climate and environmental problems. Taking the example of Central Asia, Simonett explains: “In Uzbekistan they have resources and engage in intensive agriculture, in Tajikistan they have water. This has the potential for conflict but in most cases, cooperation prevails. In this domain, we are tiny fish, but we strategically cooperate with larger players, such as the World Bank and the UN and this will have a longer-term impact.”

What Simonett is still striving to achieve is a stronger sensitization to the countless mountain regions of the world, and the recognition of mountain issues in international processes: “The people in the mountains suffer disproportionally from climate change. They are doubly affected: they already live in poorer regions, and extreme environmental events increasingly threaten their livelihoods.”

Since its founding, Zoï has been an Alternative Bank of Switzerland (ABS) client – naturally, says Simonett: “As an environmental communications organization, we constantly preach sustainability; hence we also want to have an account with a sustainable bank.” In Corona times, Zoï is pleased with the CHF 50,000 credit limit that ABS grants it for the current account, and uses the facility to resolve cash flow issues. And ABS keeps getting closer, even physically, tells Simonett, laughing: “First, our bank only existed in Olten, then in Lausanne, now it has a branch a few metres from us.”

Alternative Bank Schweiz (ABS); Moneta 4/2020;
Credit portrait; Author: Esther Banz
As per Zoï’s environmental policy, an offset contribution was made via MyClimate.

35 tonnes of CO₂

4.5 tonnes of CO₂

As per Zoï’s environmental policy, an offset contribution was made via MyClimate.

<table>
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2019 - 35 tonnes of CO₂

2020 - 4.5 tonnes of CO₂

Funding sources 2020

- UN (UNEP, UNECE, UNDP, BRS) 27%
- Switzerland (SDC, FOEN) 22%
- EU/EEA 11%
- World Bank 10%
- Others (OSCE, CAREC, ...) 22%
- RHT 8%

100% 1'593'078
Zoï Impact
when the environment becomes security

When the hijacked jets hit the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001, overnight the civilization felt utterly unsafe: what just happened in one of the most advanced economies could happen anywhere. ‘Security’ became a household word, and the international environmental community came to realize that linkages between the environment and security are real. The pan-European Environment and Security initiative was born with a focus on the huge space from the Baltic and the Adriatic Seas to China and Mongolia. Since the beginning, Zoï co-founders were part of a dynamic ENVSEC team convened by the UN and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

The new initiative rapidly deployed a network of experts and engaged with governments and NGOs to map the hotspots in the region and mobilize donor support. The no-nonsense innovative approach raised huge interest among communities as diverse as nature conservationists, the military and diplomats. With this almost impossible combination of actors, some of whom would otherwise hardly talk to each other, ENVSEC produced unprecedented analytical and communication products that establish the connections between the environment and security in places as different as Belarus vs Uzbekistan and Transnistria vs Abkhazia and Nagorny Karabakh. The initiative became a vehicle for effective networking and communication among the participating countries and organizations. And even if the ENVSEC partnership has long passed its peak, much of the methodology has found traction in today’s efforts to address the security risks of climate change.

Environmental / resource-use problems can provoke tensions and threaten security. Environmental policies can address these problems at source, thus reducing tension. By jointly addressing environmental problems usually unrelated to conflict causes, the conflicting parties can help improve dialogue and strengthen mutual trust.

In armed conflicts, the environment is often a victim of collateral damage. By improving the environmental awareness and conduct of combatants, such damage can be reduced.

Current Zoï work in Afghanistan, Donbas, Palestine and the Red Sea region stems from our ENVSEC experience, which gave rise to our connection with the community of like-minded NGOs. Through an informal Environment and Conflict Working Group, led and inspired by our now long-term partner, the Conflict and Environment Observatory in the UK, Zoï work has appeared in joint blogs and publications, and has helped bring the agenda for environment, peace and security to the centre of global policymaking. Zoï contributions have been present in resolutions of the UN Environment Assembly and in debates at the UN Security Council. We also jointly commemorate every year the International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict.

Apart from political reasons, no one any longer seriously challenges the pertinent link between the environment and conflict, even less so with climate change now commonly recognized as a threat to global security, the stability of states and the livelihoods of people. Nevertheless, addressing the environment and security linkages remains challenging, not least because the evidence is not always straightforward and may bear inconvenient political truths. But with our depth of experience, our contacts in the field, and our analytical and communication skills, Zoï Environment Network remains a reliable partner in this difficult area.
Strategically located between Russia and China, Mongolia is ready to seize an exceptional development opportunity by signing onto a trilateral economic corridor project proposed under the Belt and Road Initiative. As a part of multi-billion-dollar infrastructure investments in railways, roads, energy supply and mines, the China–Mongolia–Russia corridor aims to improve transportation and further expand trade networks among the three countries and across Eurasia.

For centuries, Mongolia’s vast steppes and rich natural resources have sustained a unique nomadic lifestyle. With a mining boom and rapid urbanization, the country is facing increased pressure on its land and fragile ecosystems. In this context, the Government of Mongolia set out 2030 Green Development Goals to transform the country’s economy from a resource-intensive growth model into one that is climate-resilient and efficient, while preserving its unique environment.

Zoï has engaged with the Government of Mongolia – supported by the Government of Switzerland – to find answers to the pertinent questions coming with this rapid transformation: Will the China–Mongolia–Russia economic corridor incentivize sustainable infrastructure investment towards a green economy for Mongolia? What are the implications of infrastructure development for the environmental sustainability for Mongolia? What are the challenges and opportunities? Our analysis has been distilled in typical Zoï fashion into a visual synthesis that conveys the main messages for policymakers and contributes to better-informed decisions in Mongolia as well as abroad.

At the report’s launch in Geneva in October 2020, H.E. Lundeg Purevsuren, the Mongolian Ambassador to Switzerland emphasized the timeliness of the report in creating awareness of the challenges: “large-scale transportation infrastructure tends to generate a wide range of environmental impacts – traffic pollution; landslides and hydrological hazards; and the loss or fragmentation of habitats and biodiversity.” The COVID-19 regime has unfortunately prevented a road show in Mongolia and engagement with drivers of change, including civil society. We hope this will happen in summer 2021. Mongolia is in many senses at the crossroads, and business as usual does not really seem to be an option.
The changing climate is bringing disruptions in precipitation patterns, the melting of glaciers and the rise of more frequent extreme weather events, and planners and managers in one economic sector after another increasingly depend on reliable weather forecasting, and on water and climate information. Their needs run from short- and medium-term weather forecasts and early warnings, to projections of the volume and timing of water flows to the long-term effects of global warming in specific areas. Examples abound.

All levels of government and increasingly the private sector use climate and water information in the development of their disaster risk reduction strategies and emergency response services, and depend on accurate forecasts of extreme weather events. Civil engineers account for climate in their building designs, and municipal authorities use climate information to update their building codes. Water managers need climate information to recalculate expected flows because the historical record no longer forms a reliable basis for future projections. The energy sector needs similar information for hydropower projections and to help build resilience into the energy infrastructure.

The transportation sector needs reliable weather forecasts to respond to unsafe conditions, and uses data on precipitation and temperature averages and extremes for longer-range planning. The tourism and outdoor recreation sectors depend on short- and medium-term weather forecasts, and increasingly on climate information for long-range planning. Finally, of all the economic sectors, none is more vulnerable to the weather and the changing climate than agriculture. The changing conditions in specific locations determines the selection of crops, varieties and species, and early warnings of extreme weather can provide farmers with the opportunity to take precautionary measures. Agrometeorological observations inform food security assessments, help farmers protect their crops and livestock from diseases and pests and determine the best times for planting, watering and harvesting. Also we as individuals increasingly rely on weather apps in our everyday life, including just to ‘talk about the weather’.

Hydrometeorology services are working to provide the right information in a timely manner, and Zoï is doing its part to help. In collaboration with the World Bank, the World Meteorological Organization and others, Zoï provides easily digestible bite-sized morsels of information to explain new concepts, and prepares more comprehensive surveys of the range of services that hydromets can and do offer. Our reach extends to hydrometeorology services in Armenia and Moldova, and to Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Projects in the Balkans are on the horizon. Through our work, Zoï is helping hydrometeorological services develop relationships and dialogues with specific user groups in order to tailor information products across the expanding range of consumers of weather, water and climate information.
“If I was having a bet, I would say video, video, video,” said Nicola Mendelsohn, Facebook’s female vice-president for Europe, the Middle East and Africa, in 2016 about the future of social media and the internet. This is definitely a trend that can be seen at Zoï, where the demand for videos has exponentially grown since our first foray into video production in 2014.

Its success video owes to the fact that it is an incredibly dynamic medium that lets you combine moving and static images, sounds, music, infographics, text, maps and much more all in one place to be consumed in only a few minutes.

In the last seven years we have produced close to 50 videos* in nine languages and with even more subtitles. All of them developed in a participatory manner with our partners and clients – most often international organizations or government departments.

One film at the time we became experts in producing videos for educational, advocacy or marketing purposes all on our quest for more easily understandable and better communication of environmental issues. This is what Zoï can bring to the table: informative videos that showcase environmental challenges and are infused with our geographic and thematic knowledge as well as our artistry.

Our topics? Of course, every environmental issue that needs action. Looking back, however, we created the most videos on the topics of climate change, waste and chemicals and water. From a global video on how the UN plans to become more sustainable over a national one on environmental issues in Kazakhstan to videos on the dangers of toxic and persistent chemicals and micro plastic in the ocean – we have done it all.

Our specialty? Videos that blend live action footage with animation. Together with our client we come up with a narrative for the film. Then we start on the voice-over. You know that god-like, disembodied voice you hear in videos? Yeah, that's the one. It is the backbone of any Zoï movie. Once this is done, our artists work their magic – splendid graphic design and detail-oriented animation bring whole microcosmoses to life. Thanks to animated visuals complicated correlations and natural events, such as catastrophes, can be shown emphatically and accurately. Our stories usually end in a happy end, a found solution. If we act now there is still time!

The excitement when a video first sees the light of day is hard to describe. It lets you forget about the hiccups along the way, then of course every project comes with its own set of challenges. Smooth sailing, as universally known, is naturally unheard of in film production. There are always some small things to be straightened out, be it a colour, a banner or the way a voice actor pronounces an acronym.

When all is said and done and we have delivered our video to the client and uploaded it to the internet, we are left with a feeling of achievement. It fills us with joy when we see our video as a curtain raiser at a large conference, even if it is only a virtual one (like most conferences in 2020). Looking at our mission to facilitate access to environmental information for decision-makers and the general public, we might just be on track.

Find our videos on YouTube, Vimeo and the Zoï Website.
Water Connects
Metro Map of the Amu Darya River Basin
Otto.Simonett, Director
Creative thinking and leadership

Viktor.Novikov
Project development and management Central Asia

Beibei.Gu
Project development and management China

Rebecca.Jiménez
Project management and communications

Lesya.Nikolayeva
Project management and communication greater Europe

Nickolai.Denisov
Deputy director, analysis, field and the EU

Alexandra.Mackey
Analysis and communication

Firuza.Illarionova
Field and policy support Central Asia

Alexandra.Povarich
Graphic design, climate and biodiversity

Geoff.Hughes
Policy analysis, writing and editing

Emmanuelle.Bournay
Cartography and statistical analysis

Matthias.Beilstein
Cartography

Carolyne.Daniel
Graphic design, data visualization and web design

Maria.Libert
Illustrations, graphic design

J.D
Webmaster and social media

Christina.Stuhlberger
Film-making and creative communication

Gianna.Angermaier
Social media

Marianne.Gémin
Finance and Administration
Zoï Board

farewell to Susan – welcome on Board, Hanna!

Susan Boos was on our side as a chairwoman of our board since Zoï’s foundation in 2009. As an environmental journalist Susan was never shy to call environmental problems by their names and has accompanied Zoï’s activities on difficult terrain: the Ferghana valley and Kazakhstan, Donbas and the Dniester basin, Belarus and Palestine. Likewise important was her advice on issues of governance and management, always to the point and without ado. In 2020 Susan got elected the President of the Swiss Press Council, and with regrets had to step down from our board by the end of the last year. We were lucky and are grateful for having had such a long and fruitful cooperation with Susan, and despite her current busy engagement hope to continue it in one or another form.

Closing the governance breach and looking for new sources of inspiration, the General Assembly has elected Hanna Hopko as a new member of Zoï board. We are proud of having on board the prominent Ukrainian journalist, passionate activist and former parliamentarian from one of our core regions of operation, and look forward to work with her in person once the COVID restrictions are lifted.

The new chair of our board is our seasoned board member Jörg Balsiger from Geneva University. Yvan Rochat, having professionally moved from our municipality of Vernier to Genthod on lake Geneva, completes the troika. Or should we call it zoïka?

On our 2021 agenda is a river rafting trip down the Ruinaulta with all our current and alumni board members on board.

Zoï Associates

Adam Begu
biodiversity and climate, Chisinau

Agnès Stienne
cartography, Le Mans

Aigerim Abdyzhaparova
BRI, climate, ecosystems, Moscow

Aleh Cherp
sustainability and energy, Lund

Alexander Shekhtovtsov
environmental information, Moscow

Alexander Usov
aquatic biology, Kyiv

Alexandra Sternin
graphic design, Konstanz

Altyn Balabayeva
state of the environment reporting, Nur-Sultan

Amangul Ovezberdyyeva
climate change and biodiversity, Ashgabat

Anvar Homidov
climate change, environment and hydrology, Dushanbe

Arevik Hovsepyan
water and climate, Yerevan

Carolyn Drake
photographer, Vallejo, California

Camille Jaillant
fashion designer Olistic the label, Paris

Christiaan Triebert
digital forensics, Amsterdam

Dasha Mokhnacheva
climate migration, Saint-Jean-de-Luz

Dmytro Averin
environmental information, Kyiv

Doug Weir
conflict and environment, Hebden Bridge

Eoghan Darbyshire
Conflict and remote sensing, Hebden Bridge

Eric Nanchen
sustainable mountain development, Sion

Ecaterina Melnicenco
climate services, Chisinau

Elena Kreuzberg
ecosystems, Ottawa

Eva Giolo
film and media art, Brussels

Fatima Akbari
environment and cooperation, Kabul

Gherman Bejenaru
hydrology and environmental information, Moldova

Gamal Soronkulov
local development, Chatkal

Jeremy Wates
environment and policy, Brussels

Hanna Khomechko
environmental rights, Lviv

Hansjörg Eberle
deminer, Geneva
Launch of the report «Greening the China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor»

Nickolai of Arabia Jeddah, December 2020

School Interns Yara and Naquie watching Zoï videos.