

Study Retreat on ecology and society along the New Silk Roads

16-18 September 2019, Cansiglio Forest



Right before millions of people all over the world took to the streets to demand urgent action on climate change, a **group of international scholars** from different fields of research came together for a study retreat in the Cansiglio woods, where they analyzed the **socio-ecological implications of the new Belt and Road Initiative**

An innovative scientific retreat, based on the Theory-U approach, with the goal of **examining the environmental repercussions of the BRI from different perspectives** and drafting a declaration that could steer research towards the topic of socio-ecological relations along the BRI routes.

The idea and impetus for this retreat emerged from growing anxieties about **the risks** posed by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for socio-ecological communities along its routes. This was further coupled with an **awareness** that the development of the BRI also opens for every partner a window of opportunity to reflect deeply about the kind of progress that we want for the future of humanity: does it suffice for us to do business as usual? Or are we rather called to embark upon **more radical, systemic transformations?**

Reflecting on such critical matters requires that different perspectives be considered simultaneously, and for this purpose a group of people from a **wide range of cultural and disciplinary backgrounds** were gathered together: a conservation biologist and development practitioner (Marc Foggin), a biosocial conservation researcher (Shekhar Kolipaka), an environmental and cultural heritage legal expert (Stefan Gruber), two architects (Yun Gao and Nicholas Temple, the latter specialized in urban history and theory), and a China studies scholar working on sustainability transformations (Daniele Brombal).

In the forest they employed **co-creative techniques** by embodying different human and more-than-human entities (vulnerable human beings, animals, plants, artefacts). This process, coupled with individual reflection and meditation in the woods, helped in reaching a **wider, holistic understanding of foreseeable impacts of the BRI**. Together they sought to identify **core values** that could help lead us toward the kind of future they wish to see, and around which could commit their efforts and contribute to through their academic work about the BRI.

This vision for the future was condensed in a **declaration**, which they will be refining over the next few months and eventually employ as a basis for their future work on BRI socio-ecology, as well as to bring other people on board. It speaks about the **sense of belonging to a socio-ecological community** positioned along the BRI and calls for **caring pathways of action** that may help to bring about a future that is not primarily concerned with only material growth, but rather shaped by the concern for the whole environment as well as for current and future generations, with ecological awareness and recognition of the intrinsic value of nature with people as part of nature.