

## NEW PROFESSOR OF SOCIAL LEARNING

# A better environment starts between the ears

**Arjen Wals gave his inaugural lecture as professor of Social Learning and Sustainable Development at Wageningen University in May. He hopes to use a new educational method to inspire people to adopt a sustainable lifestyle.**

TEXT ASTRID SMIT PHOTOGRAPHY JOSJE DEEKENS

**E**nvironmental education has been part of Professor Arjen Wals's life since early childhood. Both his parents devoted their careers to it, his father as director of school gardens and recreational farms in The Hague, and his mother as environmental education and international training officer with an educational organization. Yet he never planned to go in this direction himself. 'You can't save the world like that', he thought. The environmental problems of the day, such as fish dying in the Rhine, acid rain and the mass poisoning disaster at Bhopal in India, had to be tackled by other means. They required laws, new technology and a strong environmental policy. So Wals went to

Wageningen to study environmental hygiene. But during the course of his studies his views changed. Rules and regulations, policies and innovations can go some way towards solving environmental problems, but do not get to the heart of the matter. 'The cause of environmental problems is between our ears', says Wals. 'We have got to make sure that companies are less preoccupied with maximizing profits and more concerned about people and the environment. As citizens we must not let ourselves get swept along by the idea that we should be consuming all the time.' Behaviour and lifestyle are the key to change, according to Wals. And so he is following in his parents' footsteps after all. First with his PhD research and now as professor of Social Learning and Sustainable Development in the Education and Competency Studies chair group at Wageningen University. His inaugural lecture was held mid-May, entitled: A message in a bottle – learning our way out of unsustainability.

But Wals is not going to follow his parents all the way. Because, he says, the old approach to environmental education – inducting a feeling for nature and the environment – does not deliver the goods. Research has shown that consciousness raising and providing information are not enough to change behaviour. Wals puts his faith in so-

cial learning. This is an approach to education which stimulates critical thinking and gets people to look for sustainable alternatives themselves. Collaborating with people with other points of view is essential to this, says Wals. 'The chances of coming up with something new are much higher than with likeminded people.'

He illustrates what is meant by social learning with an assignment he often gives to students. They have to buy a Happy Meal from a hamburger chain and analyse in groups what has gone into their meal. This means finding out what the ingredients of the hamburger, fries, soft drink and toy are and where they come from.

### HAPPY MEAL

They discover that rain forest has been cut down for the hamburger, to grow the soya for the cattle feed. Or that the toy – at least in the past – was made by child labour, and that the battery inside it can only be removed using a hammer and chisel, ensuring that the toy will end up on the rubbish dump.

After presenting their findings, the students get the next assignment: design a sustainable Happy Meal. Wals: 'A commercial perspective is important, otherwise consciousness-raising just leads to a feeling of powerlessness and apathy.'

### ARJEN WALS (1964)

- 1982 to 1987: studied Environmental Hygiene in Wageningen
- 1991: PhD at University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, on environmental psychology and environmental education
- April 2009: appointed as extraordinary professor of Social Learning and Sustainable Development at Wageningen University



Arjen Wals at the market square in Wageningen.

## ‘We must not let ourselves get swept along by the idea that we should be consuming all the time’

Students think up their sustainable version of the Happy Meal in groups. Should it contain a vegiburger instead of a hamburger? Is it possible to make toys out of sustainable materials? And how much do these alternatives cost? ‘Throughout the process they discover that an alternative meal is much more expensive. That raises the question: how much are we willing to pay for our food?’ The entire sustainability issue is summed up in this meal,

says Wals: ‘the fact that the local is bound up with the global, and that this meal has a lot to do with biodiversity and climate, as well as with ethical and socio-economic issues.’ According to Wals, this approach to education makes a big impression on participants. ‘Being active and finding out for yourself provides a profound learning experience. No newspaper, website or television programme can compete with that. You also no-

tice that groups consisting of students from different cultural backgrounds come up with more creative solutions than homogeneous groups do.’

The new professor sees his task as the further development of social learning for sustainability issues. For primary, secondary and higher education, but also for hybrid forms of education such as collaborative projects between companies, knowledge institutes and schools. ‘There are hundreds of initiatives in the Netherlands making use of social learning. We want to research which forms work best. Which competencies do teachers need? Which competencies do learners acquire? There are countless indications that social learning has an impact on behaviour, but we want to know much more about that.’ ■