



EINLADUNG ZUM VORTRAG

im Rahmen des Forschungsseminars (Doktoratsstudium) SS 2009

am MONTAG, 18. MAI 2009, 17 UHR c.t.

INSTITUT FÜR GEOGRAPHIE UND REGIONALFORSCHUNG
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THE BALANCE OF NATURE AND THE NATURE OF BALANCE:

A Geomorphic Systems Perspective

Concepts of steady-state equilibrium in geomorphology (as well as in ecology and other sciences) are inextricably tied to a “balance of nature” perspective which postulates normative, self-maintaining states. Recent work on complexity in geomorphic systems, however, shows that there are no goal functions in earth surface systems; no (single) normative condition for landforms and landscapes. Apparent states of balance are emergent phenomena which arise as side-effects of simple geomorphic principles. This is illustrated using the concept of steady-state relationships between sediment supply and transport capacity in streams.

Jonathan Phillips is Professor of Earth Surface Systems and University Research Professor in the Department of Geography, University of Kentucky, USA. Though his work has emphasized fluvial and soil geomorphology, his overarching interest is in earth surface systems, including complex nonlinear dynamics; interactions among landforms, soils, biota, and climate; and the coevolution of landscapes, soils, and ecosystems. His students, for reasons never quite made clear, refer to him as the “Jedi Geomorphologist.”

Organisiert von

Arbeitsgruppe *Geomorphologische Systeme und Risikoforschung*

Institut für Geographie und Regionalforschung

Universität Wien