

CHAPTER 1: BEGINNINGS

From some woods in Bavaria to a bathroom in Cambridge, this is where the Biosphere Expeditions journey starts

Water is splashing and it's hard to hear her, talking and standing at the sink in the small bathroom in Cambridge, throwing ideas around. "Why don't you get people to contribute to expeditions you then take them on – just as you did on those student expeditions we organised"?

The world stops. Water splashes in slow motion. And there it is: the idea, the eureka moment, the moment you see a clear path ahead, bright and white against the tiles of that small bathroom. There it was. In that moment, the vision of what it is today. A short sentence, an idea, a beginning and so much more.



Wind back to some woods in Bavaria a generation or so earlier. A steaming lake in the morning mist, no more than a puddle, but a sea of wonder to a small child with his father, stalking out a badger sett. Seeds were laid there and then. A fascination with nature, a sense of wonder about the natural world in its infinite forms. The trees that tower above like silent guardians of secret places, their branches enveloping and protecting, but also threatening. The green mosses at their feet and ivy creeping up their trunks, dripping with water in droplets that turn the world upside down. Badgers making strange noises deep underground, grunting and whining far away, near the centre of the world. Muddy fox tracks and hidden squirrel feeding tables. The fragility of it all. The silence during hours of waiting that is not really silence, but bliss in what the child thinks must be the wildest and most exciting place on earth. Gone are the dreams of wanting to become a fireman, a jet fighter pilot or whatever young boys dream of growing up to be.



Previous page:

The woods in Bavaria where the seeds for Biosphere Expeditions were laid in the 1970s © Werner Hammer †.

Opposite page:

Eureka moment student digs in Cambridge, 1998.

Topsy-turvy world in a droplet.

This page:

Jungles - the word and the habitat - stir the child's imagination and a desire to explore them.

25 YEARS OF BIOSPHERE EXPEDITIONS

The word "expedition" takes hold in the child's head without him knowing what it means. There it mixes with images of steaming green jungles, egged on by wide-mouthed viewings of Kipling's classic of the same name, brought to flickering screens through Disney's dream world. Later more serious contenders join. There's Sielmann, a German Attenborough long before the child knows who that is, and his "Expeditions to the animal kingdom" in books and on TV. There's Horst Maas and his book "Waterways to freedom (with survival guide)" with tales of long canoe journeys through the unknown. There is Alexander von Humboldt, the 18th century explorer and polymath with his expedition journals full of adventure and remarkable discoveries. And there's Paul Theroux's "The Mosquito Coast" with Harrison Ford as the hero trying to conquer the jungle and failing.

But far-flung travel was not on the cards. It did not have to be. The woods and Alps were on the doorstep and there was also exploration of the virtual, analogue kind: books, maps, TV and the endless expanses of a child's imagination. In that expanse, the idea took hold,

This page:

Influential books that charted a path towards Biosphere Expeditions.

Opposite page:

Paratrooper children taking themselves very seriously on exercise in Germany, 1988. The author is in the middle
© Alexander Mätzig.

The spires that beckoned: Tom Tower, Christ Church, Oxford University, 1991.

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alongside the word. A path was charted, a dream created: a biology professor researching some beetles somewhere in the jungle.

The rest followed, almost. Biology at school and then university, only interrupted by a spell of national service and then some more. Formative years of hardship and danger and children playing war. It almost swallowed the child, had the dreaming spires not beckoned strongly from abroad.

There, in a most British ivory tower, expeditions finally start to mean something. Where else but in Britain would students be encouraged (and funded) to do research and explore far away, adding a little bit of knowledge to the archives of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) and some dusty university library.

"And if you don't write up your results, you might as well lie on a beach. Then it's not an expedition, but an excuse for a holiday", said Shane Winsor, godmother of all things expedition at the RGS. Lesson learnt. Forever.



Ghilleen Prance, that giant of botany at Kew takes the dwarf under his wing, who organises expeditions chasing medicinal plants in the Amazon delta one year and in Madagascar the next.

The path is lit brightly ahead now – the high beams switched on by the first two expeditions: an undergraduate degree, then a PhD, then jungle professor. And then....crisis. The naïve child learns that academia is not just researching beetles in the Amazon. It's teaching also, admin, lots of admin, publish or perish, elbows, egos and a world of extreme specialisation. The dream starts to fade, a house of cards collapsing. Has the dog barked up the wrong tree for the last 25 years?

Not so, she says in that bathroom in Cambridge. And the rest is history.

This page:

Inventing medicinal plants and their usage on a first student expedition to the Amazon delta, 1992 © Russell Cobban.

Opposite page:

Chasing the Malagasy periwinkle on the second student expedition, 1993.

