

Newsletter

2006



INSIDE

**Reports from
the field**

**Inside
Biosphere**

**New expeditions
& developments**

A welcome from Martyn Roberts, President of the Friends of Biosphere Expeditions.



Dear Friend

I'm delighted to welcome you to the very first edition of the new Biosphere Expeditions newsletter, which you have received as one of the exclusive benefits of becoming a Friend.

When thinking about what to say in this introduction I wanted to put in a few words what I thought was the reason most people took part in expeditions. Reading some feedback from a scientist who took part in a recent expedition I realised he had captured my views in a very clear way when he said: "Biosphere Expeditions fills an important link between those who want a taste of life in the field and those who benefit from the assistance provided by expedition members and the money they contribute. Without the extra hands, eyes, ears and skills that expedition members provide, there would be no way I would have been able to collect this much valuable data by myself in a similar period of time".

For me going on expedition is all about being involved and knowing you can make a difference in so many ways. Being a Friend is a natural extension of this and a way it can be done throughout the year and not just by taking part in an expedition.

One of my first chances to promote these views was when I got invited to take part in a radio programme as an ordinary person who does this sort of thing. Imagining it to be as part of a pre-recorded item that would go out on regional radio in the middle of the night, I was shocked to find myself live on "Excess Baggage" (a national BBC Radio 4 travel show) on a Saturday morning. Overcoming my, by then, considerable nerves, I hopefully managed to put across why people like us do spend our time and money on pursuing wildlife research and sustainable conservation.

I do hope you enjoy the newsletter. It is packed full of stories from expeditions and news about what is happening in the future. Remember none of this would have been possible without people like you.

Keeping in touch and keeping involved are crucial to continue and build on all we have achieved so far. This is your magazine and I would love to hear your views on it or anything else for that matter.

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The UK Office by Matthias Hammer

With more offices around the world joining the club, the importance of the UK as the 'mothership' and hub of operations has been steadily increasing. Strategic planning, posting things out, supporting the 'satellites' and much more, all happens from the UK and sometimes we're creaking under the load, but delighting in our own success.

Our press and media work in the UK has seen Martyn (el presidente!) appear on BBC Radio 4, Namibia feature on ultra-cool MTV with celebrity DJ Trevor Nelson (who? – yes we didn't know who he was either, but he turned out to be a good sport out in the field), as well as a smattering of articles throughout the press like The Independent, Global Magazine, Diver Magazine etc.



Starter page on Altai in Global Magazine.

We've increased the number of offices, the number of people coming on expedition, the number of expeditions, and the number of our staff. So far it's all good news, but there is also the challenge of avoiding the pitfalls that come with fairly rapid growth – something we've spent a good deal of time thinking about and discussing internally, most recently at our annual staff Biosphere Get-Together, which this year happened in Germany.

For 2006 we look forward to continued growth in terms of numbers, offices and expeditions.

The German Office by Claudia Hammer

In March we attended the ITB (International Tourism Bourse) together with Land Rover. The ITB is the world's biggest tourism market and a very good opportunity for making new contacts or to build on existing relationships. In fact our Oman expedition is a direct result of making a contact at the ITB.



Our stand at the ITB.

We also ran various competitions for expedition places and with various partners. All of them were very successful in raising awareness about Biosphere Expeditions in the media and amongst the public. We are hoping to transfer this successful competition blueprint to other countries as well in the future.

One competition was a design competition for a Biosphere Expeditions T-shirt. One of the winning designs is below. We will now take this and other designs and make it into a final product, which will be sold in Germany through the country's largest outdoor equipment retailer.



Our media work in Germany has been very successful yielding articles and features in important magazines and TV programmes, such as VOX Tierzeit and Geo Saison.

For 2006 we hope to build on this and also on the networks we have started to establish with partner country tourism boards, other non-profit organisations and NGOs.

The French Office by David Moore

As a new office this year, we started the year building up a press database and sending out press releases introducing the Biosphere concept and telling people about our opening. We focused on those publications which were most interesting to us (travel, adventure travel, nature etc...), found out who the editors were and sent them personalised letters together with the press pack, a leaflet and a copy of the press release. The response to this was good and we succeeded in getting information snippets in several big magazines (Forets, Utreia, Oceans, Ecotourisme, Terre Sauvage) with a number of journalists coming out on expedition with us in 2006. Other publications are also beginning to find us online and starting to contact us with increasing interest.

4x4 FAIR - Land Rover invited us to attend the 4x4 fair at Val d'Isere this year, providing us with a chance to showcase the Biosphere vehicle and get ourselves a little better known, at least in 4 wheel drive circles!! It also resulted in coverage in a few publications such as 'Land' magazine, on the radio and on the fair DVD. Since the fair Matthias has met again with Land Rover in Paris and we are looking at ways to work together in the future.



Operations Assistant Pascal Tchengang giving an interview.

IN THE OFFICE - The organization is now a legal non profit organization in France, an important step for us – this was done in August when we deposited the necessary legal documents at the 'Prefecture of Paris' which resulted in Biosphere Expeditions France being registered as an 'association' as recognised under the 1901 law.

It is great to be able to talk to French people from a base in France, and do it in their own language, as it makes it easier for French people and it is simpler for us to get our expedition concept over. We believe we can build on a good start in 2006.

Erin McCloskey on setting up the North America office

North America, more specifically Los Angeles California USA, is new territory for Biosphere Expeditions and this "jungle" is seemingly an expedition in itself. As much as this city is known for its chaos and smog it is, surprisingly or not, a city full of environmental and conservation organisations. The opportunities are seemingly endless to network within this community and draw public attention to Biosphere Expeditions and its mission.

Being on the coast, the ocean breezes blow away the smog and keep the climes moderate in temperature. There are still many challenges to one trying to live in an environmentally conscientious manner owing to the emphasis on car travel rather than bikes (even though there is a fantastic bike path that extends for miles north and south along the shore), little to no recycling programmes implemented and commercialism running out of control; yet, many people are loyal to the health food store, are buying or on a one-year waiting list for a hybrid car and are energetically lobbying and/or suing (in true American fashion!) the government on environmental violations.

Three main areas have become evident in which to introduce and increase the exposure of Biosphere Expeditions in North America: 1) media (print form mostly magazines) and tourist board contacts, 2) the ecotourism sector and 3) public events. One of the most important local events is the upcoming Adventures in Travel Expo, a major tourism event that is held here in L.A. every year and to which most of the big players in this market as well as travellers (interested in alternative, luxury or high-experience travel) are in attendance. I will be attending the expo and am investigating who else will be there – media, tourist board reps, editors/publishers, members of similar organisations and other relevant individuals and companies – to meet with and establish in-person contact.

In addition to the outreach to individual future expedition members, students may be another area of the public yet untapped. I have made a list of universities with natural history or environmental studies that may be interested in developing credited field experience expeditions with their senior students. This is an idea to develop if Biosphere has the interest in dedicating specific weeks of the year to student expeditions, separate from those that are joined by the general public.

The ball is rolling and since the beginning of January 2006 we have had a toll-free number and a Post Office Box address. The next stage is finding local partners, such as equipment suppliers, to refer North American expedition team members. Overall, I have to say that the energy is rising and Biosphere Expeditions in North America is sure to be an increasingly successful venture.

Volunteer Impact - A Question of Culture By Katherine Wilden, UK Operations Director

The value of volunteers in scientific data collection has recently been 'proven' again. This comes as no surprise, but it still seems that there are some scientists out there who doubt the value of the data collected. Since the early 80s many scientists have shown their faith in this process and many respected scientific papers have been produced based on the work of volunteers.

The recent work to show the value of volunteers was in a study published by J. Foster-Smith and S.M. Evans in 2003. Their work was based on work with volunteers on a project on the Isle of Cumbrae in Scotland. Given the fact that there is almost certainly neither the manpower, nor the financial resources to meet the demands that are being placed upon science, then the importance of papers like this in convincing the unbelievers of the benefits of volunteer participation cannot be overstated. However, I think the more interesting findings are hidden beneath this headline conclusion. The other deductions in the report have some useful pointers for both Biosphere Expeditions as an organisation and for the team members who come on expedition with us.

The volunteers that were studied did make some mistakes in their work, but these were similar errors to those that were also made by experienced scientists. The report suggests that there were three reasons for the volunteer mistakes: 1) lack of experience; 2) inadequate guidelines; and 3) insufficient training. On the first point there is little that we can do. It is clear that in some areas lack of specific experience might be a drawback but I don't think this applies strongly to our expeditions, as we only work on scientific studies that can be carried out by laypeople and they are designed for people with no experience. We will continue to work on the design of the science to ensure that this continues to work for us. But also, I have seen so many instances where team members' different experiences have benefited a project that I think the pluses of alternative backgrounds outweigh any potential drawbacks. People bring professional skills such as IT and teaching, as well as their softer skills such as their ability to empathise with others and their, often boundless, enthusiasm – these things cannot be taught and bring so much to an expedition.

I believe that the other two points give us the key lessons from this report. You can have as much enthusiasm and experience as you like, but unless you are told what to do and how to do it, there is no chance that you will produce good information for anything, let alone data that will be good enough to support a scientific publication. Ensuring that people are well briefed and that all aspects of the training are thought out is crucial and something that we continually strive to improve. But the other side to this

issue is much more complicated and involves creating a culture on expedition. We need to be particularly careful of how people (and I mean all the people involved in the expedition, from the team members, to the cooks, to the expedition leaders) are properly involved once they are out in the field. People need to feel that they are part of a team, that their views are important, that they have a crucial part to play and most importantly of all, that any question is a good question. If we can have a culture on all our expeditions where people feel that they can ask anything (and give any view) and that they will be listened to and that their contribution will be valued, then I think that people will feel completely involved. They can be sure that they know everything that they need to know in order to be able to contribute effectively to the scientific work of the team. And that, after all, is what it is all about.



Which way was north? The author grappling with a GPS.

So if you are into making resolutions, and you feel that there is space for you to squeeze another one in, please have a thought for how you can personally help to inspire and involve the people involved in our expeditions. You may be able to help by simply being a positive person when you are on expedition, or when you talk about the way that people can go on such expeditions. You may be able to help by asking lots of questions when you are 'out there' so that others feel encouraged, or you may be one of the people who are giving the answers, in which case remember to be kind and patient (even though it may be the seventh time that you've answered the same question that week). If we all do our bit to create a supportive and enquiring culture, then I'm sure that everyone will go out into the field with a better understanding and feel for what they are doing. This will mean a better informed group of team members and will help to minimise the little mistakes that would otherwise be made. The volunteers studied by Foster-Smith and Evans only made the mistakes that scientists also made. With the right support this means that volunteers could become even better at this work than the 'professionals'. Something to think about. And certainly something to work towards for better results!

Matthias Hammer, Field Operations Director looks at the new kids on the block (Oman & Honduras) and what it's like to set up a new expedition

I am often asked how we find new expeditions. The answer is that they find us. Every year I receive about 100 requests from scientists and organisations all over the world. All of them receive a standard reply referring them to a page on the Biosphere website that explains in some detail how we work and how to put in a first short proposal and project outline/idea. 90% I never hear back from, probably because our site makes people realise that an application involves some rigorous scientific proposal-writing, or that there is more to Biosphere Expeditions than showing a bunch of tourists some birds or elephants.

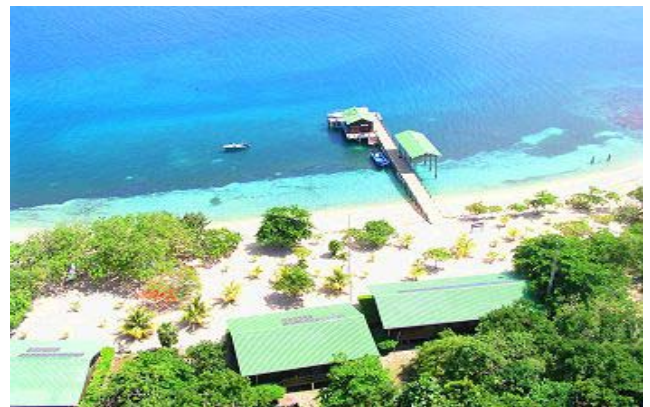
Of the 10% who write back, many fall by the wayside for various reasons. Some are too expensive: I was offered a coconut crab project on Zanzibar once, but the accommodation in some swish lodge would have run to £800 per slot per person alone! Some projects are interesting, but not realistic to run for the moment: I have been talking to a chimpanzee biologist in the Congo for three years now, but we both agree that it's simply too dangerous to run an expedition there, for now at least. And some projects simply don't hold up to scrutiny of their science/conservation content.

The select few that make it past the first hurdles have to write a full-blown research proposal, a sample expedition dossier, safety & emergency plans, risk assessments and of course a detailed budget proposal. It's a tall order, but those that come back with all the paperwork are getting close. The research proposal is assessed internally and externally, the budget is haggled over and the various safety plans are gone through. All this is done remotely by e-mail and only when both parties are happy, do I go on a reconnaissance visit. During this visit, I look at everything in situ – the proposed base and its facilities, services, research activities, logistics, red tape, transport etc. And I turn into a guinea pig, travelling the way that a typical team member would and meeting the local partners at the proposed assembly point to get an idea of how easy or difficult it is to get there. We then travel to the proposed base, mimicking the expedition route as much as we can. Once at base we go through the research activities together with me as a guinea-pig team member. We stage an accident. We talk to local helpers and stakeholders (like landowners or bureaucrats).

Once Biosphere Expeditions commits to a reconnaissance visit, there is a very good chance of the proposal becoming an expedition. And how long does this whole process take? Usually two to three years so there are no quick fixes!

Oman

The lead-in for Oman was unusual in that I was approached by a representative of Oman and Gulf Air at an exhibition in Berlin, who contacted local scientists and brokered the first proposal. Once the paperwork was all done, the airline flew me out to Oman first class (the first and probably only time I will have been in seat 1A on a flight!) and gave me the red carpet treatment with suites in hotels for me to "hold court" in. *Very unusual and not the customary guinea-pig experience.* Once out of Muscat and into the field, things soon approached rodent level again and we spent some days driving through the study site, hiking up and down mountains, looking at possible camp sites and talking to various house owners in the local town about descending on them with an expedition team. Permits were not much of an issue, since the scientist works for the "Diwan" (the Sultan's court), so came with the very highest credentials. We soon had a base, valleys and areas for investigation and a workable research plan. Land Rover Dubai is going to provide the vehicles and I look forward to January. When you read this, I will be out there.



Not a bad place for a research station...

Honduras

From our very first e-mail, I could tell that our local partners, the Honduras Coral Reef Fund (HCRF) were used to the process of writing proposals. Replies were speedy, well-written, well-researched and professional. As it turned out we will be one of several partners that the HCRF will be working with in a bid to become self-sustaining, financially and otherwise, from their Swiss foundation and donor roots. When I arrived there, I found almost everything that I could ask for already in place. A very well-equipped research station (on a beautiful coral cay), and tried and tested safety and research procedures as part of a very professional set-up. Even the time-keeping for my pick-ups, meetings and dive outings was impressive. When I mentioned this, Adrian Ovideo, one of HCRF's key people laughed and said that "this was drummed into us from day one by our Swiss donors"! No further explanation necessary. It will be good to go back there in March...

Emma Hume, local biologist Peru on what happens when Biosphere Expeditions isn't there

Our most intensive period of data collection is usually during the six weeks that Biosphere visits but even when they are not here, research continues, particularly through collecting data on our two long-term projects looking at changing mammal populations and parrot and macaw behaviour at two nearby clay licks. Helping us collect the data are volunteers who work on the research projects in the mornings and spend the afternoon helping with maintenance projects, pilot projects, on the farm or walking and enjoying the forest. Unlike with the Biosphere team, volunteers also help out with the cooking which can result in some interesting dishes!



Emma Hume and her son at the station.

The station is also open to school and university groups, which are fun groups to host. We've had, for example, Warwick University Expedition Society helping build bridges and platforms and a college from New York came out as part of their MSc coursework. Unfortunately we are finding that these groups are few and far between and we cannot earn enough money from them to keep the station running. We are therefore offering tours and special interest group packages for visitors with a keen interest in the environment and wildlife but with less time to spend in the forest. Some of our time is therefore also spent in town sending emails and scouring the internet for potential visitors – not an easy task!

In January to April of 2006 we will be collecting missing data at the macaw licks to be able to publish our first paper later in the year. We have joined forces with Dr Donald Brightsmith of the Tambopata Macaw project who is helping find volunteers and will collaborate with us in the final publication – all Biosphere team members that have helped us on the projects will be informed when the article is published. We plan on taking two teams of volunteers upriver for six weeks each group to be able to collect all the data necessary. Many an early morning will be spent peering through binoculars trying to spot early parrot arrivals and count numbers on the lick – hopefully this brings back many fond memories for some of you!

We will also be doing long watches from the canopy platform constructed by some crazy Kiwi volunteers in 2005.



The 'crazy Kiwi' platform high up in the canopy.

January to April will be a busy time for us as it's also the time of year when Brazil nuts are traditionally collected. With nearly 300 Brazil nut trees inside our concession we usually collect around 150 sacks of nuts, each weighing 85 kilos. Quite a task when the concession is over 5 km inside the forest! But since the nuts are delicious, high in protein and about the most sustainable way to use rainforest resources, we hope you all munch your way through many kilos over the Christmas period as you will be supporting rainforest conservation with every bite!

After Biosphere is with us from May to the beginning of July we hope to host a few tour groups during the high tourist season, which coincides with the dry season as from October onwards the rains begin and visitor numbers typically decrease. Usually October and November are good months to catch up on any maintenance or construction jobs of the station buildings as once the rains become heavier in December such jobs are very difficult to complete. December is therefore a good month to relax a little and I often take the opportunity to go back to England to visit friends and family before the Brazil nuts start to fall again in January.

Claudia Hammer, Office Manager Germany recalls a day on the mountain ridge of Nizke Tatry, Slovakia

The drive up to our mountain hut 'Durkova' was very steep and bumpy and apart from a few jokes there was complete wide-eyed silence in the Land Rover for most of the hair-raising way.

When we arrived, we were shown our sleeping spots up in the sleeping room under the roof. The woman was very strict about not wearing shoes in the sleeping room and showed us exactly how much space we are to reserve for us – we thought that this night will be quite cosy. At that time the room was still empty and we couldn't foresee what was to come later that day....

After a quick lunch from our packs we headed off in four teams in different directions. There was thick fog on the ridge, but we pushed on. Up on the ridge the mist was so thick that at times you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. We went on head down to look for tracks & scats.

The next time I looked up, I realised that I had lost my team. It was a bit scary, since there was only 'white air' around. I shouted and whistled, but no reaction from my team. I thought: "Oh my, will I ever find the others again?" and then "ahh well, I'm Biosphere staff and I can't be a wimp. Eventually I will find somebody or find the hut again." So I continued and of course found my team again pretty quickly. Heading on the mist suddenly cleared and we spotted a lone male chamois straight away and spent some time observing him. Further east there was still more to see and observe: we found a red deer mother with her baby, heard marmots whistling and later that afternoon spotted a group of about eight chamois heading towards the ridge and another single chamois standing cheekily on the footpath. We would have liked to go further, but knew that we had to turn back to be at the hut before sunset.



Mountain observation post.

By the time we got back, it was getting dark. And we were really amazed: there were people everywhere. Tents had been set up around the hut and everywhere people were preparing their dinners, along with guitar music and singing – it felt like on a

Boy Scout excursion. When we fetched our headlamps we got a glimpse into the sleeping room – sleeping bags everywhere! You could no longer see the floorboards.

Outside we unpacked our food and gas cooker to prepare supper. Everybody was very, very hungry and we looked forward to having a warm meal. Of course we couldn't do without a decent cup o' tea or coffee while waiting. Unfortunately, the gas cooker didn't really manage the amount of spaghetti we wanted to eat and when it was finally done it was a very sticky and slimy white mass. It was pretty unappetising, but none of us cared – we were so hungry – and laughed about it and enjoyed our dinner. Just when the hot water for our after-dinner drinks was ready the hut manager came and said "you've got five more minutes, then everything has to be tidied up and you have to be in the sleeping room". We looked a bit sheepish, but this is the mountains: 10 o'clock is bed time – no exceptions. So we skipped doing the dishes and threw everything together and packed it into the Land Rover. When we got into the sleeping room we almost got a heat shock. People were everywhere – just everywhere. We stumbled over other people; they were even lying in the aisles. The whole room was cramped with people. The night was quite an experience! I think no one was really sleeping, just dosing – it was just too hot.



Durkova hut & Land Rover – before the invasion!

But it was a short night anyway. I think from half past two onwards, people were heading off again. We got up at about four to have a quick breakfast. The fresh air outside was revitalising. Soon we too headed off again in small teams. My team and I were heading further west. The fresh air, the sunrise, the dew was so beautiful and we enjoyed the silence and life awakening all around us. It was Saturday and about 8:30 when we had our second breakfast.

At around two in the afternoon we drove back to base. Luckily we were the first team being back, so after our first cup o' tea or coffee of that day we rushed into the showers. Two wonderful days - a brilliant experience!!

The Ss of Biosphere Sri Lanka - Andrew Sansom provides a collection of his memories as a team member

Safety

We were often reminded by Matthias and Marian (expedition leader) that our priorities on the expedition were Safety, Science and Satisfaction in that order.

The risk assessment at the beginning of each expedition is typically reassuring even when it refers to elephants, snakes and sunstroke (for the slapheads among us). It reflects the thoroughness of Biosphere in preparing the expedition. It wasn't quite as reassuring to then be told that we had already experienced the highest risk aspect of the expedition, as passengers on the roads of Sri Lanka. Quite possibly the worst driving I have seen in 15 years of travelling!

Science

As they say in the shampoo advertisement, here comes the science bit. It is readily acknowledged that the current level of human-elephant conflict must be reduced. There are far too many deaths and injuries on both sides of the conflict, which during our stay was even referred to in one newspaper as a war.

During the expedition we collected large amounts of data from analysing dung samples, monitoring roads and electric fences, interviewing villagers, and observing elephants inside & outside the national park.

This data was collated and analysed by Dr Pruthu and his assistant Dr. Jenny Pastorini.



Gathering data.

Satisfaction

The personal highlight of the expedition was our second visit to the National Park. For two hours we sat in our vehicle observing the wild elephants. All but two of them ignored us the whole time. One of the matriarchs occasionally circled the vehicle, looking at the strange creatures inside, and probably sniffing for food. A younger female mock charged the vehicle on the two occasions the engine was started

for us to leave. As a photographer the experience was superb, and as a wildlife lover it was incredibly special to watch these highly intelligent animals and their social/family structures in their natural habitat. Very few experiences can match the adrenalin and endorphin rush I experienced during those two hours, to the degree that if the vehicle had been more comfortable I would have rolled over and gone to sleep immediately afterwards.

Stone, One (= 14 pounds = 6.3 kg)

The expedition involved quite a lot of exercise both in terms of walking and of riding on the traditional bicycles (without any gears) that are common in Sri Lanka. This was a bonus for me, as when combined with the effects of the heat, and the healthy food prepared by Jayasakara, Master of the Vegetarian Curry, I managed to lose a stone during the expedition. Now I just need another five expeditions.

School

After some tough negotiations, also known as begging and pleading, Mary, Rosie and I managed to obtain a few hours off from the expedition and went shopping in the nearest small town for materials for one of the local schools. We then experienced a nery tuk-tuk ride to the school, and recovered by spending an hour or so with the children. This particular school was lucky enough to have two English ladies teaching there as volunteers. The children were benefiting from learning English, and from having teachers that attended every day, although the building appeared close to collapsing in places.

Swimming

The elephants weren't the only highlight of our visit to the National Park. During our lunch break we were able to swim in the river. This was a welcome relief from the heat, and we were told was totally safe. That was in contrast to the reservoir we went past every day that the locals did their laundry and bathing in. There were at least crocodiles in that reservoir. Perhaps the local people knew they weren't dangerous, but none of us foreigners were going to take the opportunity to confirm that.

Sri Lankans

The abiding memory of the whole trip (other than the elephants) was the friendliness of the Sri Lankan people. Jayasakara and his kitchen / facilities team seemed more like friends, and not just because he controlled the bar.

Special, Superb, Splendid, Superlative

I thoroughly enjoyed the 2004 expedition in Slovakia, but Sri Lanka in 2005 was even better and I would strongly recommend it to anyone interested in elephants, conservation or Sri Lanka. However, in 2006 I will probably go to the Azores with Biosphere.

Andrew Sansom is a UK-based Wildlife & Travel Photographer. His work can be viewed at www.andrewsansom.com and he can be contacted at info@andrewsansom.com.

Azores - Pere Morera shares his experience of being a research assistant with the project

When I first got in touch with the local scientist team in Azores, I never expected the amazing experience that I was about to live. I had worked before as a research biologist running projects with international teams in other countries like Norway, USA, Sweden or Spain, but I had yet to know the beautiful Azores archipelago and its amazing marine biological diversity. That was the first time I was hearing about an organisation that combines valuable scientific research with the participation in the project of inexperienced people. There was something new for me out there, a new concept I was willing to experience.



The aim of the expedition was to collect valid data on whales, dolphins and loggerhead turtles in order to map their distribution and abundance in the waters of the Azores archipelago, in an effort to elucidate the animals' life histories and migration patterns across the oceans and assist with the formulation of effective conservation strategies. My main responsibilities as a research assistant were to assist the resident biologist Lisa Steiner with all the scientific tasks going on onboard our research vessel, especially those involving the expedition members (data collection procedures and guidelines, analysis and interpretation), and also in talks and presentations at our base in Horta. To be honest, at the beginning I was a bit sceptical about the value and reliability of the data collected in such a project by volunteers with very different educational backgrounds, knowledge and experience, but I soon realised I was completely wrong. Their open minds, positive attitude, and common passion towards the job that was being conducted there were finally more important than their lack of experience in the topic. Having worked with biology students in the field as their instructor, I can openly say that most of the expedition members I had the pleasure to work with in the Azores had a better predisposition for the fieldwork than some college students. Maybe it was their knowledge of the fact that they were not experts, maybe their concern of making mistakes while developing their tasks on the expedition, which

made them keep intensively focused on their job and paying attention to all the given parameters, sometimes even more focused than experienced scientists.

Working hand in hand with Chris and Lisa, their combined expertise, knowledge and enthusiasm about the marine wildlife, the waters and islands that constitute the Azores archipelago and its history, made the whole experience wonderful. I learned a lot about the Azores wildlife by being together with them every day out on the ocean. As a marine mammal biologist with field work experience in northern countries, I only shared the basic knowledge on cetacean biology with them. Together with them and the rest of the expedition members, I discovered for myself that the Azores archipelago is a unique place in the middle of the Atlantic ocean, perfect for the study of the marine biology and the existence of an expedition such as the one organised by Biosphere. Its wildlife is spectacular, most notably the friendly common and bottlenose dolphins that had no fear of our presence, but also the rest of the whales, seabirds, and marine fauna, that were hospitable enough to allow us entry into their domains.

I consider my first experience with Biosphere Expeditions as something unique and very special. It is fair to say that Biosphere opened my eyes to a new way of understanding and conducting science that I like and admire as well. Everybody gets some sort of benefit by participating in such a project. The expedition members can experience how it feels to be a scientist in the fieldwork, increasing their knowledge of marine mammals and clearly understanding the ways in which scientific studies are undertaken. The scientist team gets funds to be able to develop its studies that could not take part without the expedition members' donation to the project, extra hands for the field work, and also a fresh and new point of view of part of the study given by the volunteers, always a helpful point of view that can sometimes offer new ideas on issues that come up during the study.

After my stage in the Azores with Biosphere Expeditions, after seeing how they give science and research a new sense, and after experiencing what the organisation offers both to scientists and ordinary people, I had something new to work for and to keep as a model for my future professional plans. The expedition was a complete success to me; every aspect of it exceeded my expectations. I have to say that one of the most pleasant experiences was the quality and character of Biosphere's staff and their work, and I would consider their presence a plus and a good reason to join the expedition. I agree with all the expedition members that say that the success of these projects is ultimately down to the group, the human part, and all the people involved in the first Biosphere's expedition to the Azores made it an unforgettable experience to me.

Altai - An extract from the diary of expedition leader Tessa McGregor

9 July

Mosquitoes biting before breakfast. It's the price we are paying for this warm weather. Many team members out with Andrei and Nastya to see burial mounds and standing stones in the 'valley of a thousand stones'. They are so diligent they can't stop surveying so I've got some data sheets to go over soon. Helge back from the hide this afternoon delighted. He was woken at 5 am by an Altai snowcock and got great sightings and footage. As if that wasn't good enough, he also got really good and close views of ibex (nine in total - five adults and four young) and was able to record lots of behaviour. No wonder he and Ivan tripped down the valley in record time (1 hour and 20 minutes with heavy packs!!!). I just want to go to the hide right now. The overnight group is due back this evening. Who knows what they will have found? Will let you know.



Corridor area observation post.

10 July

Overnight group surveyed new part of corridor area. Interesting and potentially good habitat but lots of signs of human disturbance and evidence of poaching. The area is close to the Tuvan border and looks as if it's only being used by poachers at present. I take group for overnight camp to one of the valleys (and ridges) behind Tapuair. Stunning drive. Glaciers and snow on the tops of Silugiem and Tapduair. This is my third year in Altai and these

drives are familiar, but I get the same sense of awe. It's so beautiful, so vast, so..bloody difficult to find any sign of snow leopard in!! But that's the challenge! The stony riverbeds are filled with flowers. I'm not sure I've ever seen such intense colours or so many flowers. We get to the valley. Brilliant driving by Oleg and steep learning curve for Raman (he does very well). We set up camp and split into two groups for surveying. I go with Oleg, Helge and Ulrich. The start of every survey is the same - exhausting! It's very hot and despite reeking of DEET, mosquitoes and every other biting insect seem to find me irresistible.

11 July

Cooler morning. Off in two groups again. Raman's group to survey adjacent valley and glacial lake. My group to survey steep ridge. Find signs of ibex, argali (so many trails!) and Altai snowcock. Find good trail to set up trail master next slot. Survey right up the summit of ridge. Amazing!



Yurt at base camp & team (Tessa McGregor bottom row left).

Helge and Ulrich feel they are in 'Mordor' (Lord of the Rings land). Helge may be a professional photographer, but how he manages to carry 15 kg of equipment up these slopes is beyond me. I struggle with less than five! We go down steep scree to valley and find about 40 argali/ibex resting depressions half way, plus more tracks. This is wonderful habitat, but the poachers know that too and they were here before us. Plenty of evidence of wild boar diggings in valley (sorry Roger - never found your hat. Tilly hats may pass through elephant guts unharmed, but stand no chance with Altai wild boar, marmot and ground squirrels!). Both groups back at camp by 16:30. Pack up and long, difficult but unforgettable drive back (beautiful bird of prey sightings and many marmots), circumnavigating core area, in order to show Raman before Oleg leaves. Back at base camp find Abai and pile of sticks, rush matting and wooden circle - it's the first part of the yurt! The rest will follow on Wednesday and we will have a yurt at base camp at last! Very jolly evening sharing information, vodka and data. Brilliant starry sky. Temperature falls in the night to zero.

Namibia – Expedition leader *David Moore* fills you in on some expedition gossip

After two months of fun and frolics out in the Namibian bush, let me fill you in on some of the highlights for this year's expedition teams. Real tough expedition conditions were stringently maintained (honest!), despite the new base camp on a comfy guest farm with two swimming pools. The expedition work had changed this year too and now focuses not only on the cheetahs, which we had pursued in previous years, but also on leopards and brown hyaenas. Six box traps, four slots of eager Biosphere team members and a great team of scientists, student interns and trackers ready to instruct and assist - it all made for some memorable moments and fantastic memories.

Having been based on this new site since June, Harald and Birgit, our local scientists, had already succeeded in capturing and collaring three male cheetahs who had stopped off to visit one of the trapped 'marking trees' on the farm. One of our tasks during the expedition was to monitor this coalition by radiotelemetry as well as continue attempts to capture others. Over time this would give a clearer picture of where they live and how far they go.

Our first significant success came when the neighbouring farmer called with reports of two freshly killed oryx on his property. Since leopards often return to their kills to eat again, one of the box traps was immediately moved to the location. Result: one large male leopard in the trap the next morning (a first for Biosphere Expeditions and front page news on the Namibian 'Allgemeine Zeitung' newspaper). The animal being in a good, healthy condition, he was a prime specimen for the darting and immobilisation procedure and thus had the privilege of becoming the first radio-collared leopard in the area. The telemetry teams soon found out that he hung out mainly in a small range of rocky outcrops jutting up out of the savannah to the east of the farm.



Leopard in blissful ignorance that he is about to hit the headlines.

More excitement came the following week when a leopard was randomly spotted just feet from the Land Rover next to one of the farm tracks. Following up

the tracks later in the afternoon we spotted another animal running up the same river bed. The sandy location, just down from some rocky cavernous terrain certainly fitted our image of ideal leopard territory. Alfred and Springhahn, our local trackers, soon confirmed that there had in fact been a family of three animals. Unlike cheetahs who feed only from their own fresh kills, leopards are known to feed on meat up to ten days old. With this knowledge in mind we started to leave out meat as bait in the same riverbed – over time the leopard should get familiar with this food source and we could place the meat in a trap and hopefully catch another animal.



No words necessary...

The following week brought us a leopard capture, though not quite as we imagined. The excitement turned to disappointment when Birgit described the sickly old battle-weary creature that she had discovered in the cage. Close to death and no longer able to hunt for itself, it had no doubt been lured in to the cage by the appeal of the rotting wildebeest carcass placed there as bait. Nothing to do but release the poor old boy and let nature take its course. All this on the day Trevor Nelson, sort-of famous UK DJ and TV presenter, was there with his film crew to capture his experiences on his first ever trip to Africa for his show on MTV. We had quite a task releasing the animal, using a special Land Rover powered pulley system to open the cage door. I think it provided the team with some interesting footage (as did the enormous solifuge spider, which got them all screaming in the kitchen).

Pursuing this baiting idea, we started to bait two traps on the farm and frequently found brown hyaena and leopard spoor leading right up to them. Sometimes the hyaenas even ventured right up to the trap, circled around them, placed a paw inside the cage and then attempted to dig under the cage without ever going in and activating the trap. I guess they are just too damned clever for us! We had a couple of sightings of these secretive brown hyaenas, one from a team sleeping out by the hide at the Alter Damm waterhole and one whilst driving

along the road late in the evening. We know one of their dens on the farm, but so far very little is known about these cautious animals. The same cannot be said for the baboons who wandered into the traps overnight. We also released a few porcupines and warthogs as well as honey badgers, an armadillo and a caracal. We tried many a marvellous method to encourage the hyaenas into the box traps, but no luck for this species this year. No pressure for the 2006 team, but I'll be following the diary with anticipation. One brown hyaena please!



Just to take the pressure off a little – this is what a brown hyaena looks like ;->

A great thing being out in the bush is knowing that every day chance can throw exciting things our way. Some days we followed the leopard to within a few hundred metres (once a little close for comfort, necessitating a hasty retreat) and a couple of times we randomly came across cheetah groups sitting on a termite mound or sprinting across the savannah. With such a variety of other animals (the meerkats are one of the smallest and cutest, the eland antelope the biggest), every day brought new discoveries – jackals fighting, warthogs wallowing, lizards copulating, baboons swinging, springbock 'pronking'.... Alongside the anticipation and excitement of the large carnivore captures, witnessing these little moments when out in the field filling in our data sheets, counting game or looking for marking trees, all contributed to the uniqueness of the experience. I wish the incoming team happy trapping and loads of success in 2006!

Biosphere Expeditions' partners - Katherine Wilden puts the spotlight on Land Rover

Just over three years ago, Land Rover launched its "Fragile Earth" policy, aimed at all drivers who venture off road. The policy 'affirms Land Rover's continuing commitment to the environment' and 'gives important guidelines that should help all owners treat the environment more kindly.' It is a global promise to minimise the damage to the environment done by those driving Land Rovers. In practical terms, it states that the company will do all it can to ensure its activities are environmentally sound, from design and construction of vehicles to providing training in how to drive responsibly off-road.



Big sky, great vehicles in the Altai.

As well as trying to minimise damage in the UK, Fragile Earth also aims to protect the environment and help with conservation work around the world. Land Rover has chosen to sponsor four leading international environmental organisations; Biosphere Expeditions, the Born Free Foundation, China Exploration and Research Society and the Royal Geographic Society. Land Rover supports Biosphere through the loaning of vehicles, some of which remain with the projects all year round, and through direct financial support. Without the help of Land Rover, and specifically without the vehicles, it would be very difficult to run the Namibia, Altai and Slovakia expeditions and this year they will prove invaluable in the Oman. They have proved an excellent partner over the last three years that we have been working with them and we look forward to many more years together working to support our environment.

Partners

