How we create new expeditions

One question we are often asked is how we create new expeditions. The answer is not simple or quick, just as the process is not either, so bear with us. But in a nutshell, it's a pretty long and involved process and not many requests become expeditions.

STEP ❶ – Approaches

We solicit expeditions very rarely these days. Instead we are approached by a multitude of people and organisations, ranging from research students, established researchers, universities and NGOs, to commercial tours, bird watching and other wildlife-related companies. We receive about 20-30 such approaches per year. All of them are referred to www.biosphere-expeditions.org/collaboration and the four-page document contained therein, which explains in some detail how we work, what we need and don't need, and how to submit a first proposal. Basically, in this first proposal, we ask for a few pages with a rough cost outline, information about the project and how it would fit into our citizen science format.

Around 80% of those who approach us never respond to this request for a first proposal. Of course we mostly don't know why, but our educated guess is that for many of them citizen science is not what they can offer or what they are after – this, we think, applies mainly to commercial operations such as bird watching and safari-type companies. An approach of the "we are a bird watching company in x and can offer tours to y to see z – when can you add us to your catalogue?"-type is unlikely to result in the submission of a serious research proposal. However, on one occasion this kind of opener was the start of what would become our Ukraine expedition, which did end up working with migratory birds and wolves, and succeeded in creating a national park (see page 11).

Another group, we believe, is NGOs who host research teams that come with their own researchers, which is not what we need as we want to work with local researchers where there is a clear local need. Such unsuccessful approaches would typically come from NGOs running research stations and trying to sell vacancies.

A final group may be those who simply have not understood the concept of citizen science, or have not thought it through sufficiently in order to be able to create a first proposal.

From bird watching proposal to serious citizen science to national park. One of the early projects in the Ukraine (see also page 11).

STEP ❷ – First proposal

From the many initial approaches, we only receive around four to six first proposals per year on average. Of these, more than half usually fall by the wayside, because either the science does not stack up, or because the study species is not exciting enough, or the location not suitable for citizen scientists, or the proposed expedition is simply too dangerous, or because it's just too expensive.

Projects that are too expensive tend to be proposed by swish lodges or similar types of accommodation with very high prices for board and lodging. This by and large would not give us the contained, non-touristy base camp feel we are after. A luxury lodge in Zanzibar proposing a project on coconut crabs charging over $200 per day for board and lodging alone is one such example.

There's a reason why pandas are a popular flagship species... Picture from Wikimedia Commons.

This project proposal was also in the category of "not sexy enough". Although it pains us as a conservation organisation to reject projects due to lack of species appeal, we try to be fair to everyone and as such will not require proposers to jump through hoops with little chance of success in the end. And conservation often works along those lines anyway: exciting flagship species can inspire people, which attracts them and funding. There's a reason why the panda is WWF's logo. This may not sound fair, and we ignore "boring" species at our peril, but

we know from experience that next to our projects on cats, wolves, bears, elephants, turtles, coral reefs, etc., coconut crabs would simply not stand a chance. Another reason for proposals not going past the first stage are inadequate logistics or dangerous locations. We had a proposal for a very interesting chimpanzee project in the Congo once, but it's just too dangerous to take people there at the moment.

STEP ❸ – Second proposal

The one, two or three proposals per year that make it past the first stage then have their work cut out. The instructions on how to write a stage 2 proposal are ten pages alone. In them we ask for exact details on the science and how citizen science can help the project; we require details of the conservation aims and previous successes of the project; an exact budget; information on safety, logistics, partners and permits; local need, benefits and involvement; references; CVs; previous publications; etc. We also start writing an expedition dossier together.

It's undoubtedly quite a task to write a stage 2 proposal and we realise that some applicants may not have done this before. If we sense that they are trying and need help, we support them. If we sense they can't be bothered with the process, then they have essentially de-selected themselves. Some applicants are used to such processes (for example through grant-writing) and can turn around a stage 2 proposal within days or weeks. Others need much more time, which we give them as there is no hurry from our end. In that sense it is up to the applicant on how quickly (or not) they want to progress things.

STEP ❹ – Reconnaissance visits

Once the second proposal is finished and has not hit any snags (for example relating to the budget, the science or the usefulness of the project), then we arrange a reconnaissance visit with the applicant. Prior to this visit, everything has happened on paper only. This changes with a reconnaissance visit, when staff travelling there become guinea pigs, taking the travel routes that future participants would take, staying in proposed assembly point hotels and of course sampling base camp, its logistics, as well as experiencing the proposed research tasks. Amongst many other things, we also scrutinise safety aspects, the science behind the project, the people involved, the partnerships they have and how realistic the proposed conservation outcomes are.

Checking out the science behind the project – here on our new Sweden bear expedition.

The vast majority of projects that we visit on-site end up becoming expeditions, because by then it is usually clear that the potential to meet all our requirements is there. In fact, in the last twenty years only one project that had a reconnaissance visit failed to make it onto the expeditions roster (spectacled bears in Bolivia due to logistics issues). But since the process is so long and involved, the ones that eventually make it onto our portfolio really deserve to be there.

STEP ❺ – Agreement and adding the expedition to our portfolio

After the reconnaissance visit, or sometimes at the end of it, we sign an agreement with our new partners. Initially, this is always for one year only to give everyone the chance to run one expedition and then re-assess. Afterwards, we sign multi-year agreements. The vast majority of projects last much more than one year (see timeline on pages 10-21). Those that did not either did not have enough species appeal (vultures in Spain), or we disagreed after the first year on how ethical citizen science expeditions should be run (cetaceans in Scotland and elephants in Sri Lanka).

Once the agreement is signed, the expedition goes on our portfolio and we then usually need a year to recruit a team. So the process from first contact to first team in the field usually takes two to four, and sometimes five, years.

Putting names on dotted lines – signing the agreement for the Honduras coral reef expedition (in 2005).

The dirty dozen and non-growth

Our natural equilibrium seems to be about a dozen expeditions. Some expeditions finish because the project is finished (e.g. Poland, Ukraine), or the scientists move on (e.g. Namibia), or their popularity wanes (e.g. Spain), or countries become unsafe (e.g. Russia, Honduras). Their place is taken by new expeditions. Since 2010 we have had between ten and thirteen expeditions on our portfolio continuously and since we reject any neoliberal notions of endless growth (see the article on our policies on pages 57-58), this is unlikely to change. And in the end, we would like to make ourselves redundant by building local capacity and putting conservation in the hands of local people, where it belongs. ■

Voluntourism, Citizen Science?

Citizen science

The phrase 'citizen science' is a relatively new one, but it is a term used for an activity that has been going on for decades. The activities to which it refers relate to untrained non-scientists (referred to as citizen scientists) working in support of trained scientists, with the helpers not getting paid. Tasks are by and large simple and require much time – but relatively little technical input. In this way, the scientist can gather a host of vital data with minimal training for the citizen scientist. The citizen scientist, in turn, learns from the scientist, and can offer help and ideas in support of getting the work done. This is pretty much what we have been doing at Biosphere Expeditions for the last 20 years. We just haven't called it citizen science until very recently, when the terms 'volunteering' and 'voluntourism' sadly started acquiring negative connotations through the actions of unscrupulous, profiteering operators.

The rise of organised volunteering

Volunteering is a very old activity with the earliest records dating from ancient times. Some researchers place volunteerism historically within the spheres of religion and class, suggesting that it emerged from the church connections of the aristocracy and manifested as acts of 'altruistic' duty to help relieve poverty or to educate poor children. This was a result of the notion held by some of 'noblesse oblige', a French expression used in English that translates as 'nobility obliges;' the phrase denotes the concept that nobility extends beyond mere entitlements and requires the person who holds such a status to fulfil social responsibilities. This was also reflected in the virtues of chivalry, which included courage, justice, mercy, generosity, faith, nobility and hope. The charities supported by the elite then evolved into the 'Friendly Societies' and the 'Voluntary Anglican Schools' that continue to this day. Others have argued that volunteerism and community spirit took its present form in the New World with assistance from indigenous peoples to new colonists during the struggles of the first North American settlers.

Volunteer tourism is a more recent development. Its first manifestation appears to have come after World War I, when international groups of volunteers started to get together to help repair places that had been badly affected by the war. By 1961, and after another world war, the Peace Corps was founded in the USA, followed by a youth group in the 1970s. Europe was not far behind, with Operation Drake (initiated in 1978) and Operation Raleigh (1984) coming out of the UK to take people abroad to volunteer on a range of different projects. The first citizen science projects started to emerge around this time as well, with volunteers working alongside scientists to further scientific research.

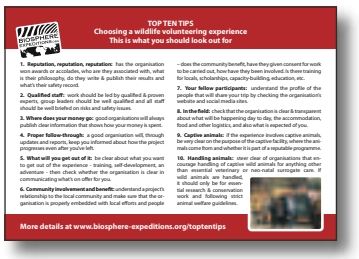
Citizen science meets volunteering holidays

Citizen science can be done in many ways. People can volunteer at home by sitting at their computer and contributing to projects on websites such as Zooniverse. This website has hundreds of different citizen science projects on its books that people can contribute to without leaving their home – everything from analysing photos of the stars to counting images of animals from camera traps in the Serengeti. If you want a more active citizen science experience, you can go out and about somewhere near your home with your smartphone and use one of the myriad of apps designed to help you recognise and record different species of interest or record environmental variables such as air pollution, etc. The data are simply uploaded to databases where scientists can access them and use them to further their understanding of their area of study. The next step along the citizen science spectrum is to go somewhere specifically to undertake citizen science work.

It was in the 1990s that organisations such as Biosphere Expeditions really began to establish themselves, offering science-based volunteering projects designed specifically around people who wanted to use their holiday time to 'do good', rather than lie on a beach somewhere. As such these activities were organised on a one- or two-week

turn-around basis so that people could volunteer in their usual holiday time. This format proved to be highly successful, bringing much additional resource into conservation and other volunteering areas. But then the problems began. Initially holiday volunteering was offered by and large by charities and non-profit organisations. But as the number of projects and people involved went through an extraordinary expansion phase during the early 2000s, profit-driven operators started to discover holiday volunteering as a source of income. Companies sprang up, sometimes overnight, with hundreds of volunteering projects on their websites. Some projects were great, doing authentic, useful and important work. Others were bad – either badly organised or with questionable outcomes. And some were downright ugly – just set up to make money for the organisers and detrimental and exploitative to the people and causes that they purported to help. Volunteering and voluntourism had started to acquire a questionable reputation with the worst examples such as exploitative and damaging orphanage voluntourism making headlines. Another problem was that people simply did not know how to choose between the opportunities on offer. Anyone can build a fancy website and often it is very hard to tell which were the good guys and which the dodgy dealers and charlatans.

In 2011 Biosphere Expeditions assembled a group of experts in volunteering, wildlife research and conservation, and tourism to discuss what pointers could be given to people who were looking for a genuine wildlife volunteering experience. The pointers needed to be easy to understand and provide practical help to those looking to choose a holiday or gap year experience that was going to be beneficial not only for themselves, but also for the wildlife and communities that they would encounter.


TOP TEN TIPS
Choosing a wildlife volunteering experience
This is what you should look out for

1. **Reputation, reputation, reputation:** has the organisation won awards or accolades, who are they associated with, what is their philosophy, do they write & publish their results and what's their safety record.

2. **Qualified staff:** work should be led by qualified & proven experts, group leaders should be well qualified and all staff should be well briefed on risks and safety issues.

3. **Where does your money go:** good organisations will always publish clear information that shows how your money is spent.

4. **Proper follow-through:** a good organisation will, through updates and reports, keep you informed about how the project progresses even after you've left.

5. **What will you get out of it:** be clear about what you want to get out of the experience - training, self-development, an adventure - then check whether the organisation is clear in communicating what's on offer for you.

6. **Community involvement and benefit:** understand a project's relationship to the local community and make sure that the organisation is properly embedded with local efforts and people – does the community benefit, have they given consent for work to be carried out, how have they been involved. Is there training for locals, scholarships, capacity-building, education, etc.

7. **Your fellow participants:** understand the profile of the people that will share your trip by checking the organisation's website and social media sites.

8. **In the field:** check that the organisation is clear & transparent about what will be happening day to day, the accommodation, food and other logistics, and also what is expected of you.

9. **Captive animals:** if the experience involves captive animals, be very clear on the purpose of the captive facility, where the animals come from and whether it is part of a reputable programme.

10. **Handling animals:** steer clear of organisations that encourage handling of captive wild animals for anything other than essential veterinary or neo-natal surrogate care. If wild animals are handled, it should only be for essential research & conservation work and following strict animal welfare guidelines.

More details at www.biosphere-expeditions.org/toptentips

The Top Ten Tips that emerged have been recognised and covered across the world (see www.biosphere-expeditions.org/toptentips for details) and are designed to help people make good, informed choices:

1. Reputation, reputation, reputation: has the organisation won awards or accolades, who are they associated with, what is their philosophy, do they write & publish their results and what's their safety record.

2. Qualified staff: work should be led by qualified & proven experts, group leaders should be well qualified and all staff should be well briefed on risks and safety issues.

3. Where does your money go: good organisations will always publish clear information that shows how your money is spent.

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We are glad to say that we have had some really strong coverage of this approach and we hope that it will make a difference, helping people to choose the right kind of volunteering holiday. ■