VOLUNTEERING TRAVEL GUIDE & MORE
Welcome

to the seventh issue of the annual Biosphere Expeditions Magazine. Voluntourism continues to hit the headlines and in this year’s Magazine we explore the breadth of this topic. There have been some very justified criticisms levied against the sector, particularly in the social and humanitarian fields. Inside we argue how volunteering in citizen science, wildlife conservation and research works well, resisting the pitfalls that other types of volunteering may fall into. And for those thinking about working with Homo sapiens, rather than other animals, there are some tips, guidelines and resources on how to avoid the dark end of voluntourism and enjoy yourself at the same time.

Beyond all that, we showcase our expeditions and their latest developments, introduce the new Costa Rica sea turtle project and share with you news of our alumni, partners and friends. We hope you enjoy the read.

Kathy Gill Dr. Matthias Hammer
Strategy Adviser Founder & Executive Director
Natur- und ArtenSchutzexpeditionen - nachhaltiges Reisen und ethischer Voluntourismus


Promouvoir la conservation de la vie sauvage – pour la nature, pas le profit

Des vacances respectueuses de la faune sauvage – un voyage engagé dans le développement durable et la préservation.

Faites vos comptes de vacances. Rejoignez nos expéditions de préservation de la faune dans des endroits éloignés et beaux dans le monde entier. Allez dans des lieux où les autres ne vont pas pour apprendre de nouvelle compétence et d’expérience pratique.

Biosphere Expeditions est une organisation à but non lucratif, plusieurs fois primée et membre de l’IUCN et du Programme des Nations Unies pour l’Environnement. Pour nous une conservation réussie de l’environnement est un effort collectif d’individus, donc venez nous rejoindre sur un de nos projets portant sur la faune et l’environnement partout dans le monde. Que vous soyez jeune ou vieux, devenez un citoyen scientifique pour une ou deux semaines, ou plus.

Les bases de notre travail sont la science et les besoins locaux. Nous sommes attachés à des projets de conservation durable avec des buts clairement définis sur des thèmes cruciaux que l’humanité a le pouvoir de changer. Des volontaires du monde entier travaillent main dans la main avec des biologistes et les communautés locales afin d’obtenir des résultats positifs pour la biodiversité – la création d’une zone protégée pour les léopards des neiges dans l’Altai en est un des exemples les plus récents.


Ethical wildlife holidays – where sustainable travel meets hands-on conservation

Make your holiday count: Join our wildlife conservation expeditions in remote and beautiful places around the world. Go places where others don’t, learn new skills and experience hands-on conservation in action.

Biosphere Expeditions is an award-winning not-for-profit conservation organisation, and a member of IUCN and the UN’s Environment Programme. For us successful conservation is the collective effort of individuals. We invite everyone to join us on our wildlife and wilderness projects all over the world. Whether young or old, become a citizen scientist for one or two weeks, or more.

The foundation of our work is science and local need. We focus on sustainable conservation projects that target clearly defined, critical issues that humankind has the power to change. International volunteers work hand-in-hand with local biologists and communities to drive positive outcomes for biodiversity - the creation of a protected area for snow leopards in the Altai is just one recent example.

Biosphere Expeditions is a member of the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) and of the United Nations Environment Programme’s (UNEP) Governing Council & Global Ministerial Environment Forum. Achievements include the implementation of our conservation recommendations and species protection plans by numerous national and regional governments and NGOs, the creation of protected areas on four continents, scientific and lay publications, as well as capacity-building, training and education all over the world.
Meet the staff

Biosphere Expeditions employs a global team of wildlife enthusiasts who all contribute to the success of the organisation: expedition leaders, scientists, field-based and administrative staff. Their roles are as diverse as their backgrounds, but they all share a love of the outdoors and wildlife. Here are just two from our team and more can be found at www.biosphere-expeditions.org/staff.

Dr. Alan Lee, the South Africa expedition’s field scientist, developed his love for nature while deposited in the bushes as a young child as his father mapped rocks across some of the most remote regions of South Africa. This love for nature continues, despite several close encounters with African wildlife. He was introduced to volunteering early in life when once a month the family would volunteer at local game reserves. He graduated with degrees in Botany and Zoology in 1996, during which time he was co-opted as field assistant by his father for expeditions to Botswana. While working and travelling from London, he obtained a Diploma in Computing in 2001. He then commenced a period of seven years in Peru, first working for a volunteer project investigating impacts of tourism on Amazonian wildlife, and then from 2005 to 2010 he undertook a Ph.D. on the parrots of the Peruvian Amazon. This is when he came across Biosphere Expeditions, first as a consultant and later as the expedition scientist. Moving back home, he is now a post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Cape Town studying endemic birds of the fynbos; and conducts biodiversity monitoring and restoration work at Blue Hill Nature Reserve.

Dr. Craig Turner was born in Oxford, England. His interest in wildlife stretches back as long as he can remember and he studied biology, ecology and environmental management at Southampton, Aberdeen and London universities. Soon after graduating from his first degree, he left the UK for expedition life in Tanzania, focusing on coral reef conservation. Since then he has continued to combine his interest in travel and passion for conservation, working with a wide range of organisations including expedition companies, consultancies and the Zoological Society of London. Craig has worked in the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. When not working for Biosphere Expeditions as an expedition leader, he runs a small environmental consultancy in Scotland. He is also a published writer and photographer.
The volunteer industry is currently estimated at $2.8 billion in annual revenue and is expected to grow as more people seek volunteer experiences each year. Much of the volunteering sector concentrates on social and humanitarian work: Teaching, building projects and even work in orphanages, and to a lesser extent on conservation or animal sanctuary work. With such a huge range of options and providers, awareness of the possible unintended negative consequences of this type of volunteering is vital. Below Vicki Brown of Biosphere Expeditions’ partner organisation Responsible Travel looks at some of the options and their merits, as well as the history of and motivations behind volunteering.

Why volunteer?

The most obvious answer to this question is: To make a difference. To improve the life of someone or something, somewhere in the world and return home with a bit of a rosy glow. Some people have a particular skill that they would like to share, others have a particular attachment to a certain corner of the globe and would like to give back. But there are as many reasons for volunteering as there are volunteers. Some people are fed up with run-of-the-mill holidays and want something a little more challenging than basking on a beach. Others would like to pick up a new skill – whether that’s scuba diving or Spanish – and what better way to hone your talents than by putting it into practice straight away?

You may just fancy doing something completely out of the ordinary for a couple of weeks. You could find yourself living aboard a research ship in the Mediterranean, documenting whale and dolphin sightings. For something a little more challenging than basking on a beach, others would like to pick up a new skill – whether that’s scuba diving or Spanish – and what better way to hone your talents than by putting it into practice straight away?

The scope of volunteering today is vast – from favela football coaching to construction work to teaching and animal sanctuaries. But which ones work for both the volunteer as well as the people, places and wildlife they aspire to help?
Generally, we would discourage would-be volunteers from doing a placement purely to add to their CV. Volunteering should really be about benefiting local people, wildlife and places. However, there are certain skilled vocational placements such as healthcare, teaching and research, where individuals, perhaps part-way through their studies, can gain real-world experience while putting their skills to good use. And of course skilled professionals are always welcome, for example teachers on long summer holidays, or corporate workers on a career break who can share their IT, marketing or startup knowledge with small businesses overseas.

A brief history of volunteering holidays

Travelling overseas to help those perceived as worse-off than ourselves has a long – and always contentious – history, which can be traced back to missionary groups heading into the depths of Africa and the Amazon to convert and ‘civilise’ indigenous communities while bringing them western education, sanitation and healthcare.

Volunteer travel did not start out as a holiday, but as a chance to work abroad, often for an extended period of time. Projects were run largely by faith-based organisations or by government-based groups, such as the US Peace Corps, which date back to the 1950s. In the same decade, the UK’s VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) was founded, in which volunteers were given accommodation in exchange for their time. Both of these programmes to this day involve a serious commitment, with most programmes lasting at least two years and suitable only for skilled applicants. By the 1970s the concept of fee-paying volunteers began to take root as the environmental movement grew and scientists realised that volunteer fees could help cover the cost of research – while unskilled volunteers could contribute much-needed labour.

By the 1990s, the ‘Gap Year’ had emerged, as more and more young people took a year out before or after university, to travel the world before being tied down to full-time jobs. Keen to capitalise on globetrotters’ desire to spend an extended time abroad – and looking to gain work experience while they were at it – travel companies began offering ‘volunteer vacations’ in exotic locations. These seemed to tick a lot of boxes, offering to boost the CVs of inexperienced undergraduates, while offering them a cheap way to stay overseas for longer – and give them the emotional boost of ‘staying good’. While some volunteer placements were of genuine benefit to local communities and wildlife, it is also true that many of these opportunities were created by the travel industry (not NGOs, development professionals or the communities themselves) to fill a niche created by the gap year market. The impacts on the ground are questionable.

Today it is accepted that good intentions do not always equal good results, and while the industry remains unregulated, volunteers – and organisations – are becoming much more clued up about the pitfalls, and have begun asking many more questions, as have the media. Twenty years into the voluntourism ‘experiment’ we are able to see what has worked and what has not.

“Twenty years into the voluntourism ‘experiment’, we are able to see what has worked, and what has not.”

At the very worst end of volunteering are profit-driven charlatans that commodify people’s good intentions, exploiting everyone in the process. Lion ‘sanctuaries’ where young animals are walked by tourists and then passed onto canned hunts when they become adults are one example. Money-garnering ‘orphanages’ exploiting children, who are often anything but orphans, and well-meaning visitors are another.

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Vicki Brown is a travel writer and photographer who spent several years working with community tourism projects across Latin America and Africa. She is now a writer and editor for Responsible Travel, creating ethical travel guides to destinations around the world. Her volunteering travel guide was originally published on www.responsibletravel.com/volunteerguide.
Volunteering

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL’S LIST

OF THE BEST AND WORST OF VOLUNTEERING

UNDERATED

Marine conservation - Wildlife is not all about fluffy mammals. Marine conservation is on the rise – and with the chance to spend time living on a remote beach, nights patrolling for sea turtles, or hours underwater monitoring corals, these are some of the most diverse and worthwhile placements.

Taste of volunteering - Holiday time is precious and committing to two weeks of working might be a bit much. That’s where a taste of volunteering comes in. A day or two can be spent on conservation activities or caring for rescued animals – or spend a week of a longer trip helping at a nursery or collecting data for marine research.

Matching skills - This is an essential, yet strangely overlooked aspect of having a successful volunteer trip. You would not take over a classroom back home, so why volunteer as a teacher overseas? Using your skills – in healthcare, education, building – or manual labour will mean you can actually achieve something worthwhile during your stay – which is better for those you are helping and will make you feel much happier, too.

Family volunteering - The benefits of volunteering as a family are vast. As well as spending quality time together without an iPhone in sight, your children will gain an experience of a lifetime different to their own. And they will learn the survival skills that they pay – has made orphans something of a commodity and they are abandoned again, and again.

Teaching & coaching - Teaching abroad takes many forms – from helping students practice their English to teaching subjects that match your own skills, from science and art to music and conservation awareness. If you’re not a qualified teacher, you can work as a classroom assistant or help out with homework – or run sports coaching sessions or art workshops for kids.

Wildlife conservation - looking after animals in sanctuaries is all very well, but this is really just putting a stick-in-the-mud to an endangered species. As an example, you will be planting trees, maintaining trails and fences or monitoring and tracking animals, setting camera traps or collecting important conservation data, whether on land or in or under the sea. For example, many sea turtle species are endangered, so you could be helping to protect them, protecting habitats, releasing and removing any waste as you can do a tortoise conservation volunteer are vital to their survival. Plus, you will be living on some beautiful beaches.

RATED

Teaching & coaching - Though this may sound like one of the most worthwhile placements, it’s actually often the most harmful. A souvenir in volunteers – and the fees they pay – has made orphaned something of a commodity and they are abandoned again, and again.

Volunteering just for the posed shot to embellish your Facebook profile is likely to be disappointing for all concerned.

Of course we could not agree more about rating the crucial contribution citizen scientists volunteers can make to genuine conservation projects. Picture is an expedition group at the Sumatran tiger expedition, run in collaboration with WWF-Indonesia and local Batu Dening community group.

OVERATED

Elephant care - The world’s largest land mammal has a bit of a rough deal. Used in war, logging and entertainment, they have given consent for work to be carried out, how have they been involved. Your fellow participants: understand a project’s relationship to the local community and make sure that the organisation is properly equipped with data collection that can be done with some basic skills and that needs to be done a lot. It is often not flashy, but the pollution is a bit of a rough deal. Used in war, logging and entertainment,

Walking with lions - A photo of yourself with a lion may wow friends back home – until you realise what might happen to the cub once you have left. Habituated big cats can even be released into the wild and when the cub gets too busy to safely handled, it is not cost-effective to keep. To put it bluntly – there is a good chance it will end up being shot on a poaching hunt or on a canned hunt.

Elephant trekking - Many so-called elephant sanctuaries are actually shielded from tourists, where elephants paint, perform and carry tourists on their backs. Any service that promises elephant rides does not have the animal’s best interests in mind, they will have been badly abused to persuade them to carry tourists.

Booting up your CV - With the exception of longer-term or highly skilled placements, volunteering should never be all about your CV. CVs can be challenging, satisfying, enjoyable – but the key question is not ‘what will it do for me?’ – but ‘what will it do for others?’ Projects must exist for communities, not volunteers; any valuable skills you gain will be a bonus – not the focus.

Biosphere Expeditions’ TOP TEN TIPS

Beat the charlatans with Biosphere Expeditions’ Top Ten Tips on choosing a wilderness volunteering experience.

Whilst Responsible Travel has a good overview of the volunteering market as a whole, Biosphere Expeditions’ expertise is in wildlife conservation/research volunteer- ing and citizen science. Sadly, these days it is hard to find a worthwhile wildlife volunteering experience that achieves tangible benefits. The market is full of profit-driven, unsupervised operators, which do little for local wildlife at best and are harmful to it, and local communities, at worst.

Volunteering market as a whole, Biosphere Expeditions’ Top Ten Tips on choosing a wilderness 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.

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

1. Reputati on, reputation, reputation: has the organisation won awards or accolades, 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: is it 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 benefits: understand a project’s relationship to the local community and make sure that the organisation is properly embedded with locals.

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.
The voluntourism assault: STOP MAKING THIS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS

Bashing voluntourism and the young people that disproportionately engage in it has become a fashion. Andrew Frankel of the University of Virginia’s Social Foundations of Education Programme offers a thought-provoking alternative view.

If you are interested in or connected to the arena of international development, travel or service work, you are probably aware of the hackneyed mantra of voluntouring abroad and ‘making a difference’. Subsequently you may also know the fad of blogging about the evils of voluntourism—the apoplectic title applied by those who know better to shallow and selfish ‘service work’.

But post-volunteerist writers only scratch the surface of long-extant questions. They have portrayed an oversimplified version of Good and Evil social engagement and staked out an uncontestable moral high ground. Disagreeing with them means outing yourself as unworldly, callow, or—in Trump card—inferior.

Most problematic is not that these articles tirelessly present some ribbon-tied, bite-size anecdote: “I used to be young and ignorant and look how I’ve changed!” It is that they are so ridiculously sanctimonious. They don’t see that the High Road they insist on taking leads away from the students they are hoping to reach.

What they usually fail to mention is that the further immersed you get, the less certain your motivation and moral convictions become. And the more doubt and prospect of futility wrack your mind! When I was 18, I could not spell development—never mind know what it was—but if I had not travelled abroad prior to going to college, I never would have made it such a focus of my studies.

Even after studying abroad and graduating, I was clueless.

I went to Asia for the first time and trekked and studied and made local friends and volunteered. And even then I was clueless.

Then I got a graduate degree and taught for a student travel organisation, working and studying across the world. And still I was clueless.

Then I lived in Asia for three years, learned the local language, made good contacts, spent 60 hours a week providing a desired and necessary service. And even then, I was still virtually clueless.

“Then I got a graduate degree... And even then I was clueless.”

Anti-voluntourists cut off dialogue with students and short-circuit a learning process as if the goals and means were perfectly obvious. My personal experience as a student travel leader has made me wary of this rhetoric. A preoccupation with controlling students’ behaviour can manifest in a disdain for critical learning and resentment for students who do not fit set criteria.

New travellers should be allowed to forge their own path—just as we were—and not be written off because they are not yet doctors or engineers with highly applicable skill sets. Are we expecting full-grown Einsteins to emerge from school physics?

In the surfeit of articles bemoaning voluntourism there is a dearth of better suggestions. It is almost as if everyone wants the cargo-shorts wearing, camera-clickers to stay home—reminiscent of how we denigrate places for being touristy, because other tourists remind us that we are too. Nothing shatters our pride faster than seeing another dweeb as obtusive as we are!

But what’s the alternative—for these inquisitive young thinkers to stay home because they are not yet qualified? (And if that happens, we will not get them back when they are qualified). Is the only alternative to being a voluntourist simply not go at all? Would we then not complain that the youth are uncultured and ignorant on global issues?

“If you are never a Level 1 tourist, you never move on to Level 2.”

If you are never a Level 1 Tourist, you never move on to Level 2. How can anyone criticise these kids when we were there not too long ago and—let’s face it, world savers—might still be there today.

A realistic alternative to the reflections of the anti-voluntourists is a critical approach that places further resources and responsibility in the hands of our students and engages them deeply with issues and approaches international development humbly, understanding that personal development takes time and you can only meet students where they are. A core principle then should be that everyone comes willing to learn and in an environment of humility and inquiry students are far more open to questioning and improving their own assumptions and habits.

And still we stood in front of the Taj Mahal, making peace signs, striking yoga poses and taking pictures. Who did not their first time there?

When we as leaders are more concerned with acknowledging faults, than creating a dialogue about why there is dissonance, we miss valuable opportunities for improvement—both for the students and ourselves. Whether you want to reference Plato’s Cave or Santideva’s description of the Bodhisattva ideal, the point is the same: Seeing through the illusions is not the voca- tion of teachers or scholars—returning to the cave, re-seeing the misperceptions and working with others as we collectively retrace and redefine our awareness is the essence of education.

We all need to see more accurately the situations we encounter and our impact on our hosts. From a wider perspective, I agree with many of the observations and rebukes of the anti-voluntourists and would probably take them even further, but I can not understand the usefulness of an opinion that impairs rather than incites students’ desire to participate in their own education.

When applying our justifiably strict codes of conduct to working abroad, let’s start with ourselves and not those looking to us for leadership. It’s important to remember that we were once students and we still are—or at least we should be.
Given the criticisms levied at volunteering recently, covered in the lead article on page 10, the question of whether laypeople can be of any use in nature conservation is justified. The answer, however, is simple: yes, absolutely - if the project is set up properly! For much of biological data collection consists of simple tasks and with a little training anyone can become a citizen scientist and help to collect much-needed information. Hard data form the core of all scientific arguments, but someone has to collect the information and this is often labour-intensive and, within a well-designed research project, can therefore be perfect for laypeople / citizen scientist involvement.

Stamp collecting foot soldiers

I call this my stamp collecting argument. What I mean by this is that very often effective conservation is based on a large amount of data points, but that collecting those data points is often both labourious as well as simple. Yet no technology exists to perform the required tasks. We simply cannot ask satellites to scan the Himalayas for snow leopards (although drones may be able to do this in the near future) and there is no technical solution for changing batteries and SD cards in the camera traps now involved in a vast number of surveys. So foot soldiers are needed for this. Foot soldiers who can be trained easily within a day or two (see examples in the info box) and then go out and collect useful data or, for example, cover the often large distances between camera traps in places that are likely to be remote and inaccessible. There is often no alternative to these boots on the ground. Of course these two examples are drawn from Biosphere Expeditions’ own projects, but there is more, independent evidence too: Going back as far as the 1960s, a great deal of literature has been produced highlighting the value of data collected by laypeople and the ideas, enthusiasm and hard work that they bring to the conservation world.

A study by Dr. Judy Foster-Smith and Dr. Stewart Evans of the University of Newcastle investigated the use of laypeople to collect marine data in Cumbrae, Scotland. In this study the authors say that “much of this type of research is labour-intensive but technically straightforward and volunteers could make significant contributions to it in the future” And further, and remarkably, that “(data) generated from them (i.e. volunteers) were almost identical to those produced ….. by an experienced scientist!”

A similar study in Oxfordshire’s Wytham woods by Dr. Chris Newman and Dr. Christina Buesching from Oxford University’s Wildlife Conservation Research Unit yielded much the same conclusions. “... the study has found that people from all walks of life, with all levels of previous involvement with field ecology, from novice to expert, have something to offer to conservation... The results collected by the amateur naturalist teams proved very reliable when compared to more complex monitoring techniques used by professional researchers at Wytham.”
Volunteering

The Cumbrae study went on to highlight the additional benefits of laypeople participation: “It should be noted that there are also educational benefits from the involvement of volunteers in scientific projects... it is a means of both raising people's feelings of responsibility towards the environment and increasing their knowledge of environmental issues. An additional benefit is that volunteers may bring 'new' skills, experience, insights and enthusiasm to projects, and have the potential, therefore, of contributing significantly more to scientific investigations than simply providing a workforce to collect data.”

So if citizen science volunteers in conservation are undoubtedly useful, what then are the challenges?

Taking away jobs

Local people should do the jobs as salaried positions, rather than rich western volunteers who can afford to be unpaid. This is an argument that is sometimes made against volunteering in general and less often against conservation volunteering in particular. There may be some merit in this, but again preparation and working with local communities is key. Projects that are foisted on local communities without consultation are much more likely to fail foul of this point. Those projects that react to community demand are likely not only to not be taking jobs away, but actually generate jobs. For example by creating the need for labour and supplies to run a project's logistics as is often the case on our more remote projects, for instance in the Tien Shan mountains of Kyrgyzstan or in the jungles of Sumatra, where without the help of local people and services, we could not run an expedition or its logistics. Moreover, and on conservation stamp collecting projects in particular, there is by and large no demand or funding for the kind of very particular and focused stamp-collecting labour outside narrow project dates, nor are there local people with the relevant training or background knowledge. Of course eventually and ideally, you would like the local community to acquire the relevant skills and take over. This is the reason why Biosphere Expeditions runs a placement programme, offering local people places on its expedition, as well as training and support. The kind of community-based monitoring that has emerged in the Maldives from this (see info box on page 22) is exactly what we want to achieve through the placement programme: Local jobs and local caretaking of nature emerging out of projects that are created in consultation with community needs in the first place.

Sexy species

This, I believe, is the most valid criticism and the one I personally, as a trained biologist, struggle with most. It has been widely argued that the world has developed a very inefficient way of choosing which animals facing extinction to save, often favouring popular wildlife such as rhinos, koalas and big cats over the less well known species, including Australia's blobfish, giant Gippsland worm, or the Pacific lamprey. A recent study has shown that around 80 mammal species including lions, tigers and pandas are used by international NGOs to raise funds for conservation, but almost no invertebrates are used in this way. The result, in the words of the authors, is that “if you are an obscure animal or plant in a remote place, you have less hope of getting conservation resources, even if you may be more genetically distinct – and contribute more to an ecosystem – than a charismatic species.”

This is reflected in our expedition portfolio too, where big, impressive, fluffy, furry and 'cute' species dominate. There are the usual suspects: Big cats, whales and dolphins, quokkas (‘cute’ small kangaroos) and coral reefs in warm, beautiful and exotic locations. Sexy sells. We tried the more mundane lammergeyer in the Pyrenees, but this did not attract enough people after an initial first-year flurry of loyal Biosphereans. So these days I, with a heavy heart, have to turn down interesting proposals for lack of species sex appeal, because I know that coconut crabs in Tanzania or scorpions in Bunun will simply not stand a chance against snow leopards of the Tien Shan mountains or Sumatran tigers.

And who can blame our committed citizen scientists for wanting to invest their time and money in something exciting and inspiring? Nobody. And this is the crux of the matter and in fact how much of conservation works – by inspiring and motivating people through flagship species. Conservation organisations such as the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) know this. For them one of the world’s rarest big mammals, the Sumatran rhino, has become a flagship species for safeguarding dozens of other threatened Indonesian rainforest animals in the handful of national parks that serve as the planet’s final strongholds for these rhinos. When looking a IUCN’s Red List of Threatened Species, dozens of other terrestrial vertebrates benefit from efforts in Sumatra.

Two of these, the Sumatran elephant and Sumatran tiger, are certainly flagship species in their own right, but the list also includes a host of other significant amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals. Five vulnerable species, the king cobra - the world’s largest venomous snake – the crestless fireback pheasant, Asian small-clawed and smooth-coated otters and the binturong, inhabit all three national parks in which rangers patrol first and foremost to protect the rhino. Several threatened birds also benefit from the rhino protection programmes in two southern Sumatran national parks: The black partridge, blue-banded kingfisher, short-toed scorzal, Storm’s stork, Sunda blue flycatcher, Sunda nightjar, Wallace’s hawk-eagle, and white-winged wood duck. It’s the long list of threatened mammals, however, that truly bolsters the status of the rhinos as flagship species.

Examples of citizen scientists collecting ‘their stamps’ with Biosphere Expeditions

Camera traps are ubiquitous tools in wildlife research these days. But for there to be effective you have to know where to put them, for example a wildlife trail, marking spot, water hole, etc. So first of all these kinds of places need to be found, which is one area where the multiple eyes and ears of citizen scientists, rather than a lone researcher scoping the landscape are useful. Once camera traps are set, they need to be checked regularly, batteries need to be changed, as do SD cards and there may be maintenance jobs too. All these skills can be learnt within a training session of a few hours. And once the camera traps have done their job, pictures need to be sorted through and sorted into categories, data entered, etc.

Tools of the trade on the Sumatra tiger expedition, a leopad on the South Africa expedition and setting a camera trap on the Arabia desert species expedition.

Patrolling a turtle beach in Western Australia and collecting turtle eggs on the Costa Rica expedition.

Peaching of sea turtles and their eggs is a very big problem. There are some areas, such as in Costa Rica, where peaching was at 100% before direct conservation action. That means all turtles entering a beach were killed for their meat and/or eggs and all eggs they laid were taken for human consumption. All night beach patrols protecting the turtles and relocating their eggs to safe hatcheries, as well as round-the-clock guarding of these hatcheries have been critical in reducing peaching in many parts of the world and bringing sea turtle species back from the brink of extinction. But a large workforce is needed for the various shifts and tasks, which can all be learnt within a day of training. Volunteers, often working hand in hand with local people, have been vital in this.
Among the more prominent taxa, with ranges that overlap those of forest-dwelling rhinos, are fruit bats, spiny and tree rats, flying squirrels, rabbits, oevots, pangolins, mousedeer, sambar deer, tapir, Javan barasingha, rhinos (wild dogs), clouded leopards, Javan leopards, and a host of threatened primates – at least ten species of tarsier, loris, leaf monkey, macaque, gibbon and siamang.

So flagship species fly the flag of conservation, serving as a conservation tool, for the less sexy species as they flutter in the wind, inspiring people and attracting funding, catalysing positive action and protecting whole habitats full of more ‘boring’ species in their wake. This is how I can justify our focus on charismatic animals to myself and the organisation.

And finally, money, of course

And there is a final point, mentioned in the last paragraph (and also dealt with in some detail in our 2015 Magazine): funding. With government and other public funding for conservation being slashed across the board, private initiatives are becoming increasingly important, if not vital, in conservation. The funding and labour that citizen scientists provide every year to many projects across the globe enables them to keep chipping away at the block, year after year. This sets volunteer-based funding apart from many other funding sources, where very often support is limited to a few years at best. Yet generally government decision-making takes many years, not just a few, so efforts ebb away, breaking themselves on the big rocks of slow-moving bureaucracies that often have the economy and growth, but not conservation, on their agendas. This is certainly where volunteers for us have made all the difference. A number of our projects are now close to or over a decade in the running and it is often only through this persistence that they are able to achieve significant outcomes. Long may it continue. 

First ever all-Maldivian Reef Check survey

After years of investment by Biosphere Expeditions in training Maldivian divers in Reef Check methods, the first ever Maldivian survey undertaken by nationals alone took place in November 2014 at Wusssar reef, just to the south of the capital, Malé.

The surveys were organised by Mr Rafil Mohamed of the Divers Association of Maldives and Ms Shaha Hahinem from local NGO Gemaana. Both of them qualified as a Reef Check Educator Trainers in September 2014 whilst aboard the MV Carpe Diem for the Biosphere Expeditions surveys of North Malé atoll.

They and the Maldivian organisations they represent are committed to preserving the reefs of the Maldives in the face of population growth, increased demand on reef fish from the tourist and grouper fishery sector, and climate change threats. The hope is that civil society bottom-up efforts such as these are eventually mirrored by active government management of the Maldives’ spectacular reefs, including comprehensive controls on fish sizes when harvested and caught, reductions in overfishing of local reefs and marine reserve stipulations properly enforced at or near to every tourist island.

Individuals undertaking the survey were all trained by the expedition scientists Dr Solandt and Dr Althami, who are now resident scientists and have built up the entire survey team. They are now surveying the entire archipelago since 2011.

Dr Solandt said he was ‘satisfied that this survey has taken place the stark truth of the data collected around the Maldives so far is that reefs have very low numbers and sizes of grouper – a very important predator fish. This is of concern, because local slashers depend on fish and many predator fish species are important to keep in check some of the animals that damage the reef such as Crown-of-thorns starfish and Drepanella snails – both of which eat coral.

Rafil Mohamed adds “I would like to thank Dr Solandt and Biosphere Expeditions again for certifying us as Reef Check Educators and trainers. Dr Solandt’s training efforts and the Biosphere Expeditions placement programme for locals have kick-started us into doing this first of what we hope will be many community-based surveys to come. In the absence of the Maldivian government doing any meaningful conservation work on the reefs that form the very backbone of our country and livelihoods, it falls to us ordinary Maldivians to preserve the reefs, not least because of their beauty, but also because of their importance for our lives and culture. Because without our reefs, there would be no Maldives.”

Biosphere Expeditions’ achievements and how citizen scientists volunteers have brought them about

Southern Africa: Data collected by our citizen scientist volunteers in Namibia have helped our local and international partners make arguments that have led to the declaration of the Kunene Zambesi Transfrontier Conservation Area, or KAZA TFC. The KAZA TFC is the world’s largest conservation area, spanning five southern African countries: Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, centred around the Caprivi-Choiseau-Victoria Falls area. Also in Namibia, fewer lions, leopards and cheetahs have been killed in former predator conflict due to our data collection, awareness-building and educational work.

Oman: Data collected by our citizen scientists volunteers as well as our intensive work to influence decision-makers have led to the protection of two marine areas in the Hašsan Peninsula of Oman, where all fishing except local handline fishing has been banned by a new ministerial decree.

Ukraine: Data collected by our citizen scientists volunteers in the Ukraine have helped our local partners make arguments that have led to the declaration of a national park. This park now protects a unique steppe area jutting into the Black Sea, a stop-off point for many migratory birds, as well as a haven for teenagers (e.g. birds & walkers) and it boasts amongst other things Europe’s biggest orchid field.

Altaia Republic: Data collected by our citizen scientists volunteers in the Altaia have helped our local and international partners make arguments that have led to the declaration of a protected area in the Alta Republic, Central Asia. This area now provides a protected habitat for a number of endangered species, including the snow leopard.

Australia: When Australia created the world’s largest network of marine reserves in 2013, the Rockhuck Commonwealth Marine Reserve, site of our flatback turtle study, was part of the network. Along with our local partners, we were working towards getting flatback turtles listed within the ‘major conservation values’ of the reserve and this is what happened, with the citation being ‘Foraging area adjacent to important nesting sites for flatback turtles’.

Poland: We played an active role in saving 10 wolves from being declared legitimate hunting targets in the Bieszczadzka mountains in Poland. This was achieved by providing accurate information on the predator numbers and by influencing the local authorities who reversed their decision to cull wolves.

Peru: Together with our partners in Peru, we were able to halt a dam construction project, which was threatening a biodiversity hotspot in our Madre de Dios study site region in the Peru Amazon region.
How can we talk to them? It’s becoming harder to find people willing to give up their holiday time and money to support our cause of environmental and wildlife conservation. But why is this so? Why is it becoming harder to find people willing to give up their holiday time and money to work in wildlife conservation? The answers are proving to be multi-layered.

The rise of cynicism

There is a general erosion of belief in voluntourism, about how much good it does and who benefits. When corporate interests realised that volunteering was a big trend in tourism, they were quick to offer their own versions. These days even luxury brands such as the Four Seasons hotel group offer voluntourism opportunities to their guests. But it is not just the big boys who have come to play. Small, local operators have jumped on the gravy train too, including, at the very worst end of the scale, charlatans including, at the very worst end of the scale, charlatans.

Yet conservatives are not in favour of government programmes that have succeeded in eliminating existing programmes that have succeeded in reducing poverty and unemployment, and in improving educational outcomes, nor are they in favour of government funds for the needy, but are in favour of government funds for victims of floods, fires and low income families and those on low incomes, and a response to government for the helping of those who need help. To help others, one must take care of oneself and nurture social ties. And one must be happy and fulfilled in one’s own life. So how do we talk to each other? How do

Lakoff believes that the differing views and communications between two differing world views. In his words: ‘At the centre of the conservative worldview is a “Strict Father” Model: this model presents a technical nuclear family, with the father being the one with primary responsibility for supporting and protecting the family as well as the state to set overall policies for the well-being of children and to enforce these rules. The mother has the day-to-day responsibility for the care of the house, raising the children and upholding the father’s authority and responsibility to obey their parents. By doing so they build character, that is self-discipline and self-reliance. Love and nurturance are, of course, a vital part of family life, but can never outweigh parental authority, which is itself an expression of love and nurturance — tough love. Self-discipline, self-reliance and respect for legitimate authority are the crucial things that children must learn. Once children are mature, they are on their own and must depend on their acquired self-discipline to survive. Their self-reliance gives them authority over their own destinies and parents are not to meddle in their lives.

The liberal worldview centres on a very different ideal of family life, the “Nurturant Parent Model”, where love and nurturance are primary and children become responsible, self-disciplined and self-reliant through being cared for, respected, and caring for others, both in their family and in their community. Support and protection are part of nurturance and they require strength and courage on the part of parents. The obedi- ence of children comes out of their love and respect for their parents and their community, not out of the fear of punishment. Good communication is crucial. If their autor- ity is to be legitimate, parents must explain why their decisions serve the interest of protection and the helping of those who need help. To help others, one must take care of oneself and nurture social ties. And one must be happy and fulfilled in one’s own life. So how do we talk to each other? How do

So how do we talk to each other? How do we talk to the conservatives? David Fen- ton tells his clients not to use words such as planet and earth, because according to Fen ton ‘one of the problems we have is that too much of the public thinks that environmentalists are people who care about the environment and not about people. So the environment has become a thing apart. I think that’s why conservatives don’t care for the term. Now in the case of planet - the planet will be fine. We just won’t be on it. And so this language and these images (polar bear, planet Earth with a capital, environment, etc.) signal the wrong thing to most people, which is that we’re destroying it and we don’t care. It’s about the environment and climate about them and their lives and the economy and justice and all the things that people do...
Today, our biggest partnerships are with like-minded NGOs and grant-giving bodies (see infobox below), where there is a genuine meeting of goals, minds and values. And of course we still work with corporations, and some smaller corporate partnerships remain, but our approach and communication has changed radically since we started in 1999.

On another level, one of the most inspiring events one of us (Kathy) attended in 2015 was the ‘Communicate’ conference in Bristol, which is the UK’s leading gathering of environmental communicators, bringing together over 150 delegates to develop their skills, share best practice and debate the latest issues in engaging people with the natural world. It precipitated further thinking on the subject for us and a resolve to tackle the issue even more actively. Indeed the 2017 Magazine is likely to pick up this crucial topic as its theme.

Repetition, repetition, repetition

Repetition emerged as an important principle. In the words of Fenton again: “That’s the other thing about public interest types. Across the board we think because we’ve said something, know something, or done something, that everybody else knows it. We don’t realise the bubble we live in! It’s only when you’ve said something, know something, or done something, that everybody else knows it. We don’t realise the bubble we live in! It’s only when you’ve said something, know something, or done something, that everybody else knows it.”

Guilty as charged! We have not talked much about climate change, because we thought everyone else was doing it and we did not want to appear boring. Or we’ve felt guilty about going on about our vegetarian policy or our Top Ten Tips on how to avoid the voluntourism charlatans. No more. Turn to pages 61 and 15 for our stance on vegetarianism and the Top Ten Tips respectively and watch our website for more changes in 2016 and of course our expeditions portfolio for additions. Tanzania and Germany are two countries to look out for, but more would be telling....
Citizen scientists spot rare red uakari monkey

For the first time ever since Biosphere Expeditions’ work began in the Amazon region, a large group of about 70 individuals of red bald-headed uakari monkeys has been spotted. The arboreal monkey species, classified as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List, only occurs in seasonally flooded forests of the Amazon river basin of Peru and Brazil.

“Red uakari monkey are easy to identify from the noise they make, but they travel very fast in the tree tops when searching for food. It takes quite some effort to follow them on the ground to get a glimpse”, Alfredo Dosantos, the expedition scientist, comments. “Troops of 70, sometimes up to 100 individuals need large amounts of fruit – they never stay for long in one place. We were very lucky”, he adds. “But this is not the only relevant result the teams have recorded over two weeks of intensive forest survey.”

With a total number of 31 species, including 10 different primate species, this year’s monitoring has resulted in the highest number of mammalian species recordings so far. Focusing on jaguar and other nocturnal animals, camera traps were set for the duration of the expedition. Animals being photographed during the night were ocelot, armadillo and tapir. The presence of jaguar was confirmed by fresh tracks.

AMAZONIA - Peru: Amazonian plethora: biodiversity monitoring of jaguars, pumas, primates and other flagship species of the Peruvian Amazon

This expedition will take you to a remote and beautiful biodiversity hotspot of the upper Amazon rainforest. As part of a small international team, you will experience living and working in the jungle together with local biologists on an important wildlife survey to aid community conservation efforts and the development of sustainable management strategies. Based at a comfortable jungle lodge in a remote part of the forest, you will be working on foot in the jungle and in canoes on natural waterways, recording species, setting camera traps, creating databases, and much more. All this as an integral part of a conservation project that will preserve an intact landscape of forest for further multidisciplinary research projects.

Study species:
Jaguar, puma, squirrel monkey, wooly monkey

Expedition contribution Duration Dates Meeting point
£1240 7 days 4 - 10 Sep 2016 Puerto Maldonado
£1240 7 days 11 - 17 Sep 2016 Puerto Maldonado

More info www.biosphere-expeditions.org/amazonia
ARABIA - United Arab Emirates:
Ways of the desert: conserving Arabian oryx, Gordon’s wildcat, sand fox & other species in the iconic sandy desert landscape of Arabia

This conservation project will take you to the fascinating and iconic sandy desert landscape of the Arabian Peninsula. Working alongside scientists from the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve, you will be part of a small international team, monitoring Arabian oryx, Gordon’s wildcat, sand fox, mountain and sand gazelles, as well as other flagship species of the desert. From a comfortable oasis field camp you will venture out in the expedition 4WDs and on foot to study antelope behaviour and social structures, camera- and live-trap Gordon’s wildcat and sand fox, and monitor them by radio and GPS telemetry. All this to ensure the survival of important flagship desert species in their beleaguered world.

Study species:
Arabian oryx, Gordon’s wildcat, sand fox, sand and mountain gazelle

Citizen science helps Arabian wolf in Dubai

The Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve (DDCR) is to re-introduce the Arabian wolf into its grounds based on data collected by citizen scientists from Biosphere Expeditions. Biosphere Expeditions and the DDCR have been working together since 2012 with international volunteers collecting data on flagship desert species. Results gathered by the laypeople citizen scientists are analysed by biologist Stephen Bell and written up into a scientific report. Over the years these reports have helped in the management of the DDCR’s oryx population and the protection of the endangered Gordon’s wildcat.

The latest 2015 report (see模特) made a groundbreaking proposal to reintroduce Arabian wolves back into the DDCR. According to the report, “there are far too many oryx in the reserve and their numbers must be reduced.”

Expedition contribution | Duration | Dates | Meeting point
--- | --- | --- | ---
£1240 | 8 days | 9 – 16 Jan 2016 | Dubai

More info www.biosphere-expeditions.org/arabia
AZORES - Portugal: Fascinating creatures of the deep: Studying whales, dolphins and turtles around the Azores archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean

This expedition will take you to the remote and spectacular Azores Archipelago in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. You will photograph whales and dolphins and record them for local and international monitoring databases as part of a small international team. You will listen to and make recordings of whale and dolphin vocalisations and capture loggerhead turtles in the open ocean for tagging and release. All this in an effort to elucidate the animals’ life histories and migration patterns across the oceans and assist with the formulation of effective conservation strategies. The whole team will be working on a modern catamaran research boat during the day and staying in a comfortable and modern guesthouse at night.

Study species:
- Sperm whale
- Common dolphin
- Risso’s dolphin
- Loggerhead turtle

AZORES - Portugal: Decade of data from citizen science confirms Azorean hotspot

Information on cetacean sightings collected by Biosphere Expeditions’ citizen science volunteers in the Azores is confirming the importance of this region for a variety of species, amongst them humpback, sperm and blue whales - the largest species ever to exist on our planet.

Recent data have highlighted the importance of site fidelity (the same individuals returning to the same location again and again) for species such as sperm whales. Indeed some individuals have been recorded multiple times since 2004, when Biosphere Expeditions first collaborated with Whale Watch Azores on this long term project.

Graeme Obree, the expedition’s scientist, says that “the collaboration with Biosphere Expeditions has led to repeat sightings of blue whales in different years, as well as matching humpback whales seen in the Azores to the Cape Verde Islands. We often encounter sperm whales that have been observed more in the early or late part of the year, and such information will help determine if there are ‘winter’ and ‘summer’ whales.”

But the decade-long data collection has not only revealed patterns of the lives of whales and dolphins around the Azores. Fluke identifications have been matched with individuals recorded further afield, such as in Norway. The project supports initiatives with both the University of the Azores and University of Florida.

更多信息：www.biosphere-expeditions.org/azores

 Expedition contribution | Duration | Dates | Meeting point
--- | --- | --- | ---
£1390 | 10 days | 4 - 13 April 2016 | Horta, Faial Island
£1390 | 10 days | 15 - 24 April 2016 | Horta, Faial Island

More info www.biosphere-expeditions.org/azores
The story of LAST “Latin American Sea Turtles”, NGO partner of Biosphere Expeditions in Costa Rica

Our work began in early 1986 as the marine programme of Asociación ANAI, a Costa Rican nonprofit organisation, working to protect the leatherback sea turtle nesting population. The main objective of our work was to protect turtle nests from human poachers and beach erosion. Before the project began, the poaching rate was over 95%, but with the presence of night patrols and guarded hatcheries on the beach, this dropped to around 10%. In 2007, we became part of WIDECAST (Wider Caribbean Seat Turtle Network) whose aim is the design and implementation of scientifically sound sea turtle management programmes at local, national and international levels.

Since our beginnings our overall goal has been to improve the conservation status of the nesting sea turtles and their critical habitats in Costa Rica. Assurance for the future of the project lies in the development of new alliances with organisations such as Biosphere Expeditions - that can recruit citizen scientists to run expeditions that depend on community support, thereby generating an income for local people and reducing pressure on the turtles and their critical habitat.

COSTA RICA:
Gentle giants: protecting leatherback sea turtles through direct conservation action on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica

This volunteering project will take you to the Central American country best known for its beaches, volcanoes, biodiversity and inspired environmental policies. Working on a remote black sands beach, you will be involved in direct conservation actions to support the critically endangered leatherback sea turtle, the world’s largest living turtle. Venturing out from a research station by the beach, you will conduct beach patrols, guard and collect eggs, count and measure hatchlings and adult turtles, and assist with other direct conservation and research activities. All this to help create strategies to ensure the species’ survival into the future.

Study species:
Leatherback and other sea turtles

Expedition contribution | Duration | Dates | Meeting point
--- | --- | --- | ---
£1480 | 8 days | 2 - 9 May 2016 | San José
£1480 | 8 days | 12 - 19 May 2016 | San José

More info [www.biosphere-expeditions.org/costarica](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/costarica)
Expedition contribution | Duration | Dates | Meeting point
--- | --- | --- | ---
£1590 | 8 days | 16 - 23 Aug 2016 | Singapore
Expeditions
Expeditions

MALDIVES

LATEST NEWS

MALDIVES:
Little and large: surveying and safeguarding coral reefs & whale sharks of the Maldives archipelago

This SCUBA diving expedition will take you to the beautiful 26 coral atolls that make up the Republic of Maldives. Based on a luxurious and modern liveaboard yacht, you will help marine biologists study and protect the Maldives’ spectacular coral reefs and resident whale shark population. All this because the Maldives government identified a need for further research and monitoring work as far back as 1997. Biosphere Expeditions is addressing this need with your help and will train you as a Reef Check EcoDiver. With this qualification you will then gather important reef and whale shark data and you will also be eligible to apply for PADI or NAUI Reef Check Speciality Course certification after the expedition.

Study species:
Whale shark, coral reefs

Expedition contribution
Duration
Dates
Meeting point
£1240
8 days
9 - 15 July 2016
Malé

More info www.biosphere-expeditions.org/maldives

In the Maldives, luxury liveaboards motoring around the atolls are usually taking their guests to well-known dive sites to experience the underwater beauty that the Maldives is famous for. This September, one of those liveaboards, the MV Carpe Diem, housed a rather different clientele – studious environmentalists embarking on a training course to learn the monitoring techniques necessary to collect reef health data – Reef Check.

From five different countries, 10 participants, two of whom were Maldivian, came together on Biosphere Expeditions’ annual research expedition.

“Understanding the factors that are affecting the health of the Maldives’ reefs is the ambition of the programme”, says Dr Jean-Luc Solandt of the Marine Conservation Society and Reef Check co-ordinator for the Maldives. “It is never a simple story – when we put our heads underwater at each site, we have a basic understanding of what’s likely to be affecting the reef, but Reef Check allows us to nail this down further with data on a wide variety of factors.”
Beautifully written case for marine protection

Biosphere Expeditions, in its latest expedition report about the coral reefs of the Musandam peninsula in Oman, lamented government inaction about marine protection that is designed to help everyone - from local communities and fishermen to foreign tourists to commerce to a nation’s reputation. Responding to a press enquiry, Dr. Jean-Luc Solandt, expedition scientist and reef expert of the Marine Conservation Society, wrote a beautiful case for marine protection. Here are some excerpts:

“The biggest concerns - anywhere in the world - and in Musandam too, is the lack of funded and concerted action by governments to help ensure sustainable fishing of the seas.

What we are suggesting for the wonderful Musandam area is relatively small no-take zones to allow fishing to persist at sustainable levels in other areas. Reserves act as natural factories of fish, spilling over their juveniles, and larger fish (they swim outside the reserves) to be caught by fishermen when their densities become larger. They are for fishermen, not against them. The no-take zones spillover system has been shown to work time and time again.

It is up to Oman (as a nation) to progress this sort of management. This can be done, but there needs to be political will - and finance - to run this sort of programme. We can only offer advice. We have no power.”

MUSANDAM - Oman: Underwater pioneers: studying & protecting the unique coral reefs of the Musandam peninsula within Oman & United Arab Emirates

This SCUBA diving expedition will take you to the remote and mountainous Musandam peninsula of Oman. Based on a comfortable and modern live-board yacht, you will study the diverse coral reefs fringing the areas where the spectacular mountains plunge into the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. These reefs boast a rich mixture of beautiful corals and a multitude of fish and other animals. This pioneering study to map this unique underwater environment has already led to the creation of two protected areas. But more data on the biological status of the reefs and of population levels of key indicator species are needed for educational purposes and to be able to put forward ideas for more and larger marine protection areas. The expedition includes training as a Reef Check EcoDiver.

Study species:
Hard and soft coral, reef fish & invertebrates

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More info www.biosphere-expeditions.org/musandam
Expeditions

SLOVAKIA

Expeditions

LATEST NEWS

Large carnivores in Slovakia’s Veľká Fatra National Park

In 2015 Biosphere Expeditions ran for its fourth year its winter conservation in the Western Carpathian Mountains of Slovakia. The wild mountain valley where the expedition operates continues to support large carnivores, including lynx, wolf and bear. The spruce and beech forests of the Lubochnianska valley also have good populations of red deer, roe deer and wild boar, which are the principal prey species of wolves and lynx.

As the expedition progresses each year in February, a picture develops of the numbers and distribution of large carnivores in the valley. This helps to inform official carnivore population statistics and enables changes between years to be monitored.

Expedition participants come from far and wide, with nine nationalities represented in 2015. Tomas Hulik, the expedition scientist says: “2015 was another great expedition year. Lots of kilometres were covered walking transects in some deep snow conditions. We were able to locate all three resident wolf packs and three resident lynx individuals. In addition we recorded tracks from one bear, which was not hibernating, several golden eagles, otters and one wildcat… great results!”

SLOVAKIA:
True white wilderness: tracking lynx, wolf and bear in the Carpathian mountains of Slovakia

This expedition will take you to a little-known part of the Slovakian Carpathian mountains to monitor lynx, wolf & bear populations and their interrelationship with prey species. Based in a cozy and comfortable mountain chalet, you will be part of a small international team, working with the local scientist and contributing to an important piece of research. You will track large carnivores through snow in the forest and meadow habitats of the mountains and you may be involved in capturing and radio-collaring them. You will also learn how to recognise and record other signs of their presence, such as radio telemetry signals, scats and scent markings, camera trap them, collect samples to study their diet and for genetic analysis, and survey prey species.

Study species: Grey wolf, lynx, brown bear, wild boar

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More info www.biosphere-expeditions.org/slovakia

AT A GLANCE

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More info www.biosphere-expeditions.org/slovakia
South Africa has been gaining a reputation as the home of bogus wildlife voluntourism projects. But there are genuine volunteering alternatives too, set up by locals and satisfying local need for help with wildlife research and conservation.

Dr. Alan Lee, a South African biologist, hosted in 2015 a group of seven volunteers from South Africa, Switzerland, the UK and USA at Blue Hill Nature Reserve to assist him for two weeks in his efforts to research and conserve the unique wildlife of the fynbos. "The volunteers helped me with big cat, and small mammal camera trapping, with analysing thousands of camera trap photos, and conducting a general biodiversity assessment using flush surveys", says Dr. Lee and adds that "much of this work is time and labour-intensive and can only be done in groups. With only a couple of days training, I can turn laypeople into valuable research assistants, enabling me to do projects that I could not do by myself or simply lack the time for." But it does not stop just there. Dr. Lee aims to publish two peer-reviewed scientific papers as a result of the project, one on temporal patterns of abundance of medium- to large-size mammals from camera trap records, and the other on the Hottentot buttonquail, an endangered bird species endemic to the fynbos. This will add two more crucial pieces of the puzzle to what is known about South African wildlife in academic and conservation circles.

### SOUTH AFRICA:
**Carnivores of the Cape Floral Kingdom: surveying Cape leopards, caracal and other species in the fynbos mountains of South Africa**

This expedition will take you to South Africa’s beautiful Cape Floral Kingdom (fynbos), a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the world’s only biome contained within one country, to conduct a survey of leopard, caracal and fynbos biodiversity and to experience African fauna (such as buffalo, giraffe, eland, kudu, zebra, etc.). Based in a remote mountainous part of the Western Cape on a comfortable former farmedstead with all modern amenities, you will first learn some bush skills and then conduct surveys on foot, mountain bike or car. You will also set camera traps, conduct game counts and you may assist with cat capturing and collaring.

**Study species:**
- Leopard, caracal, black-backed jackal

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<th>Expedition contribution</th>
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More info [www.biosphere-expeditions.org/southafrica](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/southafrica)
Expeditions in 2015 ran its first year helping in the conservation of the Sumatran tiger in Rimbang Baling Wildlife Sanctuary. For twelve weeks, six separate teams of volunteers from across the globe covered 136 square kilometres to collect data for WWF scientist Febri Anggriawan Widodo, who has been managing a tiger research and monitoring team within WWF Indonesia for the last three years.

In addition to conducting surveys in the wildlife sanctuary, the expedition has also been active in local schools, delivering presentations to students and teachers about the tiger and its habitat, and what changes are needed if both are to survive. Febri adds that “it has been great to see our citizen science volunteers lead sessions and games with the students, expressing their joint passion for the rainforest across all language divides. A large factor in saving the tiger’s habitat is local education. With the head teachers backing us and the students themselves all keen for us to build on this aspect of the project, we have had a very positive effect. We look forward to building on this next year.”

SUMATRA - Indonesia:
Forest flagship: researching & conserving critically endangered Sumatran tigers in Rimbang Baling Wildlife Sanctuary, Sumatra, Indonesia

This tiger conservation project will take you to the Indonesian island of Sumatra to survey critically endangered Sumatran tigers and the largely uncharted and fascinating rainforest setting in which they are struggling to survive. You will be working as part of an international team from a comfortable traditional timber house expedition base inside the forest. You will be covering ground on foot and in boats, looking for tracks, kills, scats and the animals themselves, and setting camera traps. You will also work with local people on capacity-building and creating local incentives for tiger conservation.

Study species:
Sumatran tiger, Sunda clouded leopard, tapir

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More info wwwbiosphere-expeditionsorgsumatra
Confirming Snow leopard presence and ground-breaking prey modeling

One of the highlights of the 2015 Tien Shan snow leopard expedition is the confirmation of snow leopard presence in the Kyrgyz Alatoo range. Three individual instances were recorded over the course of two months.

While this is exciting, especially for volunteer citizen scientists doing the ground work in the field, the project does not focus solely on the search of snow leopard signs, but also collects information on prey species. For example, mammals and birds that can reveal information on the biodiversity and health of the habitat as well as disturbances.

When talking about how the data are used, Dr. Tytar, the expeditions’ scientist, mentions a new approach called ecological niche modelling or species distribution modelling. This consists of the combination of readily available environmental digital information (for example temperature, moisture, vegetation, etc.) with ground data collected by volunteers. Computer software then combines the two to arrive at some sophisticated forecasting of wildlife distribution. It also identifies new areas that have not been surveyed yet, but that could be promising snow leopard habitat. “With modern computing methods a lot can be done”, Dr. Tytar adds, “but the bottleneck turns out to be that there are often very little ground data. So the data collected by our expeditioners in the field adds a fundamental missing piece of information to an existing digital information puzzle, enabling predictive analysis of species distribution even across non-surveyed areas - an exercise which would otherwise not be possible.”

AT A GLANCE

TIEN SHAN - Kyrgyzstan: Mountain ghosts: protecting snow leopards and other animals of the Tien Shan mountains of Kyrgyzstan

This expedition will take you to the remote and spectacular Tien Shan mountains of Kyrgyzstan to survey snow leopards and their prey animals such as the argali mountain sheep, the Central Asian ibex and marmots. You will be working as part of a small international team from a mobile tented base camp set at various locations, and altitudes of around 2500 m. You will be covering ground in the expedition vehicles and on foot, looking for tracks, kills, scats and the animals themselves, and setting camera traps. True expedition-style base camp conditions, testing but satisfying mountain surveying, off-road driving and the breathtaking high mountains make this a very rewarding expedition.

Study species:
- Snow leopard, argali, Central Asia ibex

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More info [www.biosphere-expeditions.org/tienshan](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/tienshan)
Three threatened native Australian marsupial species

The quokka is a small wallaby in the kangaroo family (Macropodidae) and listed as vulnerable by the IUCN. It is restricted to the south west of Western Australia and two near-shore islands. On the mainland, quokkas are threatened by introduced animals such as foxes, cats and feral pigs, loss of habitat, inappropriate fire regime and climate change.

The Western quoll or chuditch is the largest carnivorous marsupial found in Western Australia and is also listed as vulnerable by the IUCN. Populations of this species declined dramatically after European settlement due to habitat loss and introduction of the European fox. By the time a recovery plan was prepared in 1994, the chuditch was considered to occur in just 5% of its original range. Chuditch are known to be sparsely distributed over large areas and a considerable amount of effort is required at these locations to confirm the presence of the species.

The quenda or Southern brown bandicoot is a small omnivorous marsupial that has a special ‘conservation dependent’ status in Western Australia. The main threats to its survival are the continued loss of habitat through urban expansion and clearing, and their susceptibility to predation and disturbance by introduced animals such as foxes, cats and pigs.

AUSTRALIA: Marsupials galore: protecting quokkas, quolls and quendas in Western Australia’s Walpole Wilderness

This expedition will take you to the beautiful Walpole Wilderness Area biodiversity hotspot in Western Australia to study and protect threatened native Australian marsupials (the quokka, quoll and quenda). Working in the majestic Southern Forests of towering karri, tingle and jarrah trees, you will survey the area for suitable habitat, capture and release the animals, radio tag them, follow their movements and study their habits. You will be part of a small international team, based at comfortable and modern chalets inside the Walpole Wilderness and working with the local scientist on an important native fauna conservation project.

Study species: Quokka, Western quoll or chuditch, quenda or Southern brown bandicoot

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More info www.biosphere-expeditions.org/australia
Experience days are just what they say they are: days that will give you a unique insight into what it’s like to be in the field with Biosphere Expeditions assisting scientists with wildlife research and conservation. They are set amongst the beautiful scenery of a national park or protected area, where you will be part of a small team, alongside a park ranger or nature guide, and your expedition leader. You will discover expedition and wildlife research and conservation skills such as working with a map, GPS and compass, collecting important animal data, reading animal tracks and signs, using telemetry equipment and wildlife camera traps. You will also learn about the area you are in, its fauna and flora, history and the conservation work going on inside.

**Experience days in the UK, USA & Australia**

Dates & locations

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<th>UK</th>
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<th>Australia</th>
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<tr>
<td>£65</td>
<td>US$95</td>
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We will credit AU$75 | £50 | US$75 back to you if you subsequently join one of our expeditions.

More info [www.biosphere-expeditions.org/experience](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/experience)

**Schnuppertage in Deutschland**


Schnuppertage bieten: einmalig für alle Veranstaltungsorte: £65 (pro Person). Falls Sie sich für den Schnuppertag entscheiden, schreiben wir Ihnen die £65 zurück.

Mehr Info [www.biosphere-expeditions.org/schnuppertage](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/schnuppertage)
Biosphere Expeditions is an officially accredited member of the following bodies:

United Nations Environment Programme’s Governing Council and Global Ministerial Environment Forum
International Union for the Conservation of Nature
Marine Conservation Society
Reef Check

AWARDS & ACCOLADES

First Choice Responsible Tourism Awards
Winner of the “Best Volunteering Organisation” award (international award scheme based in the UK).

Multiple National Geographic awards
“Best New Trip” or “Round of the Lifetime” awards for several expeditions (international award scheme based in the USA).

Environmental Best Practice Award
Silver award by the Green Organisation (international award scheme based in the UK).

Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Awards
Highly commended in the categories “Best for Protection of Endangered Species” and “Best Volunteering Organisation” (international award scheme based in the UK).

Travel + Leisure Global Vision Award (for Responsible Tourism)
Winner of the “Conservation Award” for experience days and just a clicks away at www.biosphere-expeditions.org.

Wall Street Journal
“Top Ten Conservation Holiday” for Azores expedition.

Travel + Leisure
“Life-changing volunteering trip” for Tien Shan expedition.

Unsereit Online-Award (Environment-Online-Award)
German government prize awarded to businesses and organisations with an online presence who have displayed excellence and best practice for the environment (international award scheme based in Germany).

“Trophée de femmes” Our Namibia scientist was made a laureate of this environmental prize by the Fondation Yves Rocher.

Who are the Friends of Biosphere Expeditions?

The Friends of Biosphere Expeditions are people who feel passionate about providing support to our critical wildlife conservation and research projects across the globe. By joining the Friends you can play a vital part in making a real difference to the survival of our planet’s endangered species. Joining is easy, not expensive and just a click away at www.biosphere-expeditions.org/friends.

Become a member of the Friends

If you can’t take part in a full-blown expedition or project yet, or if you have already been with us and would like to stay involved, or if you would simply like to be part of what we are doing, then why not become a Friend of Biosphere Expeditions. Help us to support critical wildlife conservation and research projects across the globe for a membership fee starting from a monthly £8 / €10 / US$15 / AU$15.

As a Friend of Biosphere Expeditions, benefits for you will include expedition and events discounts, the Biosphere Expeditions Magazine, first notification and preference for last-minute expedition places, news and updates on how your membership fee is making a difference to our conservation work in the field, and much more. More information and a joining form are at www.biosphere-expeditions.org/friends.

What happens to the Friends’ funds?

Wondering where your money will go? We guarantee that 100% will go into supporting conservation. We can do this because we are a small, flexible organisation with no steel and glass headquarters to maintain or bureaucratic dinosaurs to feed. Whenever we make a significant expenditure on one of our conservation projects from the Friends’ funds, we will let you know in a clear and transparent way. For example, we may spend some of the fund to enable scientists from different projects to present the findings of their Biosphere-supported projects at international conservation conferences, or we may spend some of the fund on printing education materials for local people, or on training up a local conservationist under the guidance of our project scientists, or creating placements on our expeditions for local students and people. Have a look on the right for recent examples of what the Friends’ funds have been spent on.

get involved

Biosphere Expeditions has won the following:

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Friends activities 2015

In 2015, the Friends continued to concentrate on capacity-building with local people through the Biosphere Expeditions placement programme. This programme (see www.biosphere-expeditions.org/placements) now makes places for local people available on all expeditions and is supported by the Friends and the Rufford Foundation. Three testimonials from recent placement winners are below as well as two more Friends activities.

My name is Sugiona, Sugi for short. I am a final year student. I am very grateful for being part of Biosphere Expeditions’ project to protect Sumatran tigers in my own province of Nias. As a student, it was a superb opportunity for me to gain more knowledge on coral reefs and other marine life in the expedition of an amazing boat, with a great crew, including a local marine scientist and an amazing expedition leader. The expedition definitely helped me gain more knowledge on coral reefs and other marine life of the Maldives. This trip has made me realise that there is so much more to learn about coral reefs and their surrounding environment. I will definitely use the knowledge gained on this trip to help conserve the environment in as many ways as possible and including carrying out our own Reef Check surveys at different sites of the Maldives in the future.

Mohammad Abdul Rahat Yusubalieva

‘I was so excited when I found out that my placement application had been accepted. As I walked into the meeting point for the expedition, I came to meet a really nice team of people who came from different parts of the world, for the same purpose: To help conserve and experience the marine environment of the Maldives. I was really lucky to be part of the expedition on an amazing boat, with a great crew, including a local marine scientist and an amazing expedition leader. The expedition definitely helped me gain more knowledge on coral reefs and other marine life of the Maldives. This trip has made me realise that there is so much more to learn about coral reefs and their surrounding environment. I will definitely use the knowledge gained on this trip to help conserve the environment in as many ways as possible and including carrying out our own Reef Check surveys at different sites of the Maldives in the future.’

Mohammad Abdul Rahat Yusubalieva

The Friends also supported Lisa Steiner travelling to the Society for Marine Mammalogy’s biennial conference in San Francisco. Read her piece about this conference on page 58.

Finally, the Friends supported the purchase of camera traps for the expeditions to Sumatra (conserving tigers), Tien Shan (snow leopards), Amazonia (biodiversity study) and South Africa (leopards).

I was very excited to be offered a placement on the 2015 Snow leopard expedition in Tien Shan. It was an amazing learning experience for me. Although I’ve been working for environmental projects in Kyrgyzstan for a few years, I do not often get this kind of chance to observe nature so closely. Getting close to the habitat of rare animals, look for their tracks and reflect on findings with scientists after each study trek. Two weeks away from usual comfort area, living by the rules of nature also got me thinking that humans are really small compared to powerful forces of nature. My participation in the expedition gave me fresh insights, which will help to continue assisting the importance of conserving this beautiful and endangered animal and its fragile habitat.

Rahat Yusubalieva

‘Taking part in the Snow leopard expedition in Tien Shan was a precious learning experience for me. Although I’ve been working for environmental projects in Kyrgyzstan for a few years, I do not often get this kind of chance to observe nature so closely. Getting close to the habitat of rare animals, look for their tracks and reflect on findings with scientists after each study trek. Two weeks away from usual comfort area, living by the rules of nature also got me thinking that humans are really small compared to powerful forces of nature. My participation in the expedition gave me fresh insights, which will help to continue assisting the importance of conserving this beautiful and endangered animal and its fragile habitat.’

Rahat Yusubalieva

Look Ahead network

There are many ways of getting involved with Biosphere Expeditions. Joining an expedition is one, joining our Look Ahead programme is another. We are building an amazing network of people – have a look at how people have helped, we hope it gives you some inspiration. Then see which one is for you and get in touch. More examples of what people have done are at www.biosphere-expeditions.org/lookahead

Tien Shan team members setting up a camera trap

Make a donation

You can make a tax-efficient donation via our crowdfunding website www.crowdrise.com/biosphere-expeditions or straight into the accounts of our US 501(c)3 charity, our German e.V. charity, or our UK or Australian non-profits.

Media

Events

Support critical wildlife conservation and vital research by raising funds for Biosphere Expeditions. There are many ways to do this. Why not organise an event or take part in a sporting endeavour? It’s fun, a great way to meet people and to do something different to challenge yourself. By raising funds you can make a long-lasting contribution to our wildlife conservation work worldwide.

In-kind donations

You may have laptops, GPS, video cameras, binoculars or other items which you can use on expeditions to give away. If so, please let us know and we will either use them ourselves on our wildlife conservation projects or pass them onto our local partners.

Rahat Yusubalieva

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Rahat Yusubalieva
After finishing school, I was toyling with the idea of studying biology in order to become a behavioural scientist, but my parents and the job market convinced me otherwise. So here I am, 25 years later, and I am still a secondary school teacher. However, my participation in the Alaska expedition (2005) and then later in the Caprine expedition (2009) were major stepping stones that helped me turn my life in a new direction for at least some of the time. I have since then used up many of my holidays plus two subarctic years to qualify as a guide for hiking, canoeing and cross-country skiing holidays and as a field guide in Southern Africa. Whenever I am not there (be it in Scandinavia or the African bush), I am always awed and inspired by nature – a feeling which I try to impart to those I lead as well. With this profound respect for all things living comes of course the desire to protect our environment, which is why I have also taken part in many conservation projects over the years. During my travels in Africa, I also came across some quite dubious volunteer projects, which is why I discourage Biosphere Expeditions even more.

Trip leader Allyson Bailey contributes to CONSERVATION BOOK

"No More Extinction" is a book just published, which features 45 adventurous, endearing, scientific and sometimes disheartening tales that arise from working to protect endangered species. Coaig has contributed to two chapters: one on the red slender loris of Sri Lanka, the other on the pegion-three-toed dole of Panama. He worked on both projects with the Zoological Society of London.

Our expedition reports do not mix their words, for example calling on the Maldives government to show more commitment to protecting coral reefs, which are after all the basis not only for the country’s economy, but for its very existence as well. You can read them and other cutting edge scientific publications on www.biosphere-expeditions.org/reports

Lisa Steiner, our Azores cetacean specialist and expedition scientist, is OFF to SAN FRANCISCO

I will be attending the Society for Marine Mammalogy’s biennial conference in San Francisco in December 2015. There will be approximately 1,000 marine mammal scientists at the week-long conference. I submitted an abstract months ago entitled “Long-Distance Movements of Female/Trematone Sperm Whales around the Atlantic”: The abstract was accepted for a poster presentation. The poster will present results of photo-identification matches of sperm whales made between the Azores and the Canary Islands and a match between the Canaries and Madiera, as well as some inter-island movements of sperm whales between the central group of islands and Sos Miguel of the Eastern Group of the Azores Archipelago. I will have a designated time to be present at the poster to answer questions. Before the conference there is a workshop “Sperm Whale-Corridors” for people studying sperm whales around the world, which I will also be attending. This will be a chance to see what research is being done in other areas as well as a chance to network with others studying sperm whales in the Atlantic, who could provide more perspectives for matching to different regions. In addition to the poster on which I am the first author, I am listed as an author on two others: one discussing blue whale movements using photo-ID and another on the humpback whale sightings in the Azores over the past several years. During the conference there will be hundreds of talks given on a range of topics presenting current research and I will attend those that are relevant to the work that is done here in the Azores. Sperm whale migration, photo-ID, sperm whales and social organisation of cetaceans being a few areas of interest. Of course much of the work I will be presenting is based on the data I gained during the annual Biosphere Expeditions research expedition and I thank all participants over the years (since 2004) who have supported me.

Allyson Bailey writes an e-book about her Namibia expedition experience

A friend of mine once claimed that all women want to go to Tibet when they’re forty, to find themselves. Maybe I found out last but one I was a bit worried about what I might find, because my forties came and went and I never once had the slightest urge to visit Tibet. However, there may be some truth in the idea that women of a Certain Age are on the lookout for new experiences, because at 50 I found myself gearing up to be approximately 3,000 marine mammal sightings in the Azores over the past several years. During the conference there will be hundreds of talks given on a range of topics presenting current research and I will attend those that are relevant to the work that is done here in the Azores. Sperm whale migration, photo-ID, sperm whales and social organisation of cetaceans being a few areas of interest. Of course much of the work I will be presenting is based on the data I gained during the annual Biosphere Expeditions research expedition and I thank all participants over the years (since 2004) who have supported me.

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Another ETHICAL TRAVEL ACCOLADE for Biosphere Expeditions

Biosphere Expeditions has won another ethical travel accolade, this time in the “Ethical Travel Special” of BBC Wildlife, where its Sumatran tiger project was listed as one of only eight “Top Wildlife Conservation Holidays.” This latest accolade comes hot on the heels of another, where Biosphere Expeditions was chosen by a panel of experts as one of only a dozen ethical organisations in a volunteerism market “unwrapped with capitalist ventures masquerading as morally sound institutions.” This is according to World Travel Guide, who in February published its list of “12 ethical experiences for 2015” (see next page).

It is with great pleasure that we can announce the publication of a new book on the Arabian leopards of Oman. The book was written by our partners and expedition scientists in Oman, Dr. Andrew Spaldon and Hadi Hikmani, quotes expedition research results as well as Biosphere Expeditions as an example of how citizen science and community engagement can work well.

The authors estimate the Arabian leopard population in Dhofar to be 44-58 adults and also write that the species is now locally extinct in the Horn of Africa. Conservation recommendations include community engagement, protected areas, compensation & assistance schemes, visitor programmes, research and re-introduction & enforcement. The book also contains an overview of other leopards in the Middle East and concludes that “the chance to save the Arabian leopards in the wild remains, but only if conservation is inclusive of the communities of the Jabal. If not, the wild Arabian leopards will simply become, like the Arabian chameleons, a species of myth and legend alive only in the imagination of ornithologists.”

This beautifully written and illustrated book is a highly recommended read for all those interested in the charismatic and critically endangered species. Biosphere Expeditions is proud to have contributed to some of the research results mentioned in the book and to have served as an example of how citizen science and community engagement can achieve positive outcomes for our planet’s wildlife.

Shaha (left) and Shidha (right)
Researchers of Sylyugem National Park in the Altai mountains of Siberia have recently captured multiple images of snow leopards. Aleksei Kuzhlekov, a national park manager, adds that "we were able to place the cameras in the right place and painstakingly working out the movement routes of the cats. Being then so successful with our camera trapping efforts tells us that the park is their main home and hunting ground. Park staff have also found snow leopard tracks and scats (dropings) in several places around the national park, giving further evidence that the big cats are thriving in their newly created refuge".

The Saylyugem National Park was created five years ago to protect wildlife in the region, especially the snow leopard and argali mountain sheep, in an area totaling 11,180 hectares. The creation of the reserve was much needed, because poachers had killed more than ten snow leopards in the area in the 1990s alone, to sell their pelts and body parts, and also large on the Chinese medicine black market.

The snow leopard is in the endangered category on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species with as few as 4,000 left in the world, of which only 2,500 are likely to be breeding.

"We are delighted with the latest accolade," says Dr. Matthias Hammer, Biosphere Expeditions’ Executive Director, "especially because it specifically mentions that there are - sadly - many charlatan operators out there these days. It then sets us well apart from them in a counter-example of ethical and best practice, and how things can and should be done in voluntourism".

"We have been campaigning on this topic for a number of years ourselves* and have published our own TOP TEN TIPS on choosing a wildlife volunteering experience. So it is very rewarding to receive an accolade in this important context of ethical voluntourism," concludes Dr. Hammer.

There are many things that set Biosphere Expeditions apart from those that now crowd into voluntourism. Our scientific expedition reports and vegetarian policy are just two. The reasons for the latter are explained below.

Scientific expedition reports
As far as we are aware, Biosphere Expeditions is the only organisation in the world that has a direct and transparent link between the work done by its citizen scientists and an expedition report (have a look at them at www.biosphere-expeditions.org/reports). Each expedition is matched by an expedition report for that year which deals with the two main areas that expedition participants contribute to: funding and data collection. Chapter 1 of each report, written by Biosphere Expeditions, reviews the expedition logistics and publishes an expedition budget, which shows in a clear and transparent way income and expenditure for each expedition and the percentage of income spent on the project. Chapter 2 onwards, written by the expedition scientist, shows who collected what data, how they were analysed, what the conclusions were, as well as the conservation recommendations and actions flowing from this, and what future expeditions should do. In this way, each expedition comes full circle for its participants.

Vegetarian policy
Why does Biosphere Expeditions serve vegetarian food only on expeditions?
The United Nations has identified vegetarianism as one of the major ways to reduce impact on the planet; it has also concluded that a global shift toward a vegetarian or vegan diet is necessary to combat the worst effects of climate change. Also, Biosphere Expeditions is all about animal conservation, research and caring for animals in its widest sense. Because of all this, no animal meat (including fish) that is connected with animal abuse or suffering or obtained using unethical or unsustainable production and harvesting methods is served on our expeditions. And this is true for the vast majority of meat, especially in the countries we work in.

Isn’t that a bit extreme? What about personal choice and freedom?
We hear this quite a bit. We make lots of choices for people on our expeditions: Where they live, what time they get up, what model of car they drive, the type of equipment they use, the activities they do and how, etc. The food they eat is simply another one. Their choice is to accept our ethics and philosophy and come with us, or not, because they don’t agree with our policy or because they don’t want to do without meat for a week or two. There are a million ways to spend your holiday, including working in conservation. And as far as I am aware we are the only citizen science organisation with a vegetarian policy, so if people feel they really can’t do without meat for a week or two, then of course it’s their choice to do something else.

*There are various references, but I’m afraid I can’t find these at the moment. We could try to find out who the people are that we worked with at the time; it could have been colleagues of Clive Tully’s, or others whom we worked with at the time. The key message is that we have been campaigning on this topic for many years ourselves, and have published our own TOP TEN TIPS on choosing a wildlife volunteering experience.

Back in the early 90s, Clive Tully produced two editions of “The A to Z Guide for Lightweight Travelers”, published in partnership with the boss of renowned travel clothing company Kathmandu, Paul Hewcroft. Over 20 years later, and Clive has followed up with a weightless third edition on Amazon Kindle. The print editions were well received by a broad cross-section of travellers and outdoors buffs, and the book was noted for its tips on travelling light, presented in a quirky, encyclopaedia-style. The revised and expanded new edition uses dynamic cross-referencing, and retains the Dirty cartwheels which added character to the original books. See http://amazon.co.uk/tm39th

Biosphere Expeditions’ (and specifically its Sumatran tiger project) has been chosen by a panel of experts as one of only a dozen ethical organisations in a “market being swamped with capitalist ventures masquerading as morally sound institutions”, according to World Travel Guide, who has just published its list of “12 ethical experiences for 2015”.

World Travel Guide is amongst a number of organisations critical of the negative impacts that badly run voluntourism projects can have. It recently uncovered that voluntourism can have negative impacts on developing nations, from local job displacement to child abduction.

Expedition scientists above the rest – an interview with Matthias Hammer

Dr. Matthias Hammer, WWF Indonesia Riau Program and the Batah Dinding Community Group-launched the tiger expedition to Sumatra in 2014. Started in May 2015, the expedition conducts a much-needed survey of critically endangered Sumatra tiger.

Biosphere Expeditions singled out as ethical organisation in an increasingly unethical voluntourism world

Biosphere Expeditions has launched a much-needed survey of expedition to Sumatra in 2014. Started in May 2015, the expedition conducts a much-needed survey of critically endangered Sumatra tiger. Riau Program and the Batu Dinding Biosphere Expeditions, WWF Indonesia Dr. Matthias Hammer, Executive Director of Biosphere Expeditions, is delighted...
Vegetarianism

And talking about ethics, there are very obvious animal welfare, sustainability and environmental impact issues around meat production, especially in many of the places we run expeditions to, so apart from the huge environmental impact of meat, this is another reason for our veggie expeditions. According to a United Nations statistic, raising cattle for beef and milk, for example, spews more greenhouse gases into the air than all of the cars currently on the road. The same UN report also found that the livestock industry wreaks havoc on our land and water, taking up vast amounts of scarce resources and polluting the waterways more than any other industry.

And further on ethics, it’s tough to think about how your steak or pork chop was made. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, 9 billion cows, chickens, turkeys, ducks, pigs, and sheep are slaughtered for food annually in the USA alone. And these animals often suffer greatly in tiny cages, crates and pens, before enduring cruel slaughter practices. And this is in the USA, I am loathe to think about the meat and fish production processes in many of the countries we work in. The Humane Society of the United States estimates that if every American cut out meat just once a week, about 1.4 billion animals could be spared each year.

But doesn’t an army march on its stomach?

[Laughs]. Yes, Napoleon said “c’est la soupe qui fait le soldat”. And of course that’s true, so we try to provide our teams with the best locally produced food we can, just without the meat. After all we are a conservation organisation concerned with animals, so it really makes no sense for us to care and do something about the decline in biodiversity and then contribute to the problem by tucking into a piece of meat or fish in the evening. Research has shown that industrial meat and fish production is also a major cause for the loss of biodiversity. There may be fish that are taken sustainably and obviously the locals are all bound to eat fish & meat, but we want to set an example (even though it may not be understood by many or even most) and err on the side of conservationists’ philosophy and ethics for whether to come with us on expedition and share in our philosophy and ethics for an army.

But isn’t it just bad for business?

Good one [laughs]! First of all, we are not a profit-driven business. We are a non-profit conservation charity. So it’s not about burns on seats and maximising profits. It’s about bringing people together to achieve things in wildlife conservation in a way that is as ethical and low in impact as possible. It’s about putting our mouths where our hearts are, about being concerned with conservation and the environment on all possible levels during the expedition. So what we ask people for is their cooperation and understanding for a week or two, which brings us back to choice. Of course people do have a choice whether to come with us on expedition and share in our philosophy and ethics for a week or two. It’s clear what we stand for - and if you don’t stand for things, you fall down easily.

Processed meats - such as bacon, sausages and ham - cause cancer, according to the World Health Organization (WHO)

In a report published in October 2015, the WHO said that 50 g of processed meat a day - less than two slices of bacon - increased the chance of developing colorectal cancer by 18%. Meanwhile, the report also said that red meats were “probably carcinogenic”. The WHO came to these conclusions on the advice of its International Agency for Research on Cancer, which assesses the best available scientific evidence. It has now placed processed meat in the same category as plutonium, but also tobacco, as those two have conclusively been shown to cause cancer. However, this does not mean they are equally dangerous. A bacon sandwich is not as bad as smoking. Nevertheless, estimates suggest that 34,000 deaths from cancer every year could be down to diets high in processed meat.

Processed meat has been modified to either extend its shelf life or change the taste. The main processing methods are smoking, curing, or adding salt or preservatives. Processed meat includes bacon, sausages, hot dogs, salami, corned beef, beef jerky and ham as well as canned meat and meat-based sauces. The WHO believes that it is the chemicals involved in the processing, which are the main culprits in increasing the risk of cancer. High temperature cooking, such as on a barbeque, can also create carcinogenic chemicals.

In the UK, around six out of every 100 people get bowel cancer at some point in their lives. If they were all given an extra 50 g of bacon a day for the rest of their lives, then the risk would increase by 18% to around seven in 100 people getting bowel cancer. “So that’s one extra case of bowel cancer in all those 100 lifetime bacon-eaters,” says Sir David Spiegelhalter, a risk professor from the University of Cambridge. “For an individual, the risk of developing colorectal (bowel) cancer because of their consumption of processed meat remains small, but this risk increases with the amount of meat consumed,” added Dr Kurt Straif from the WHO.

Ample amounts of protein are present in whole, natural plant-based foods. For example, spinach is 51% protein; mushrooms 33%; beans 26%; oatmeal 16%; whole wheat pasta 15%; corn 12%; and potatoes 11%. Plant proteins are as complete as animal proteins at all, you almost certainly get enough energy is through meat. This is simply nonsense with no basis in scientific fact. Also, the silly focus on protein – modern diets are anything but protein-deficient – distracts attention from the high-fat and saturated content of meat. To meet nutritional requirements, you only need to eat about half a gram of protein for every pound you weigh. Even if you are a vegan and eat no animal products at all, you almost certainly get enough protein from the grains, beans and vegetables that you eat.

In addition, your energy levels will actually be more constant and consistent on a vegetarian diet. Think of high-fiber and nutrient-heavy plant foods as the big logs in the fireplace that burn for hours. Think of low-fiber and nutrient-light foods such as simple carbohydrates as wads of newspaper that go up in a puff of flame. On a vegetarian diet, you are less likely to have the meat-based energy peaks and troughs. And if people are tired on expedition, then I think this is because of the hard, physically and mentally demanding work they are doing, rather than the food we are serving.

What about health reasons?

There are lots and lots of studies that have shown the health benefits of a vegetarian diet. A study by the American Heart Association and University of Vermont found that those who ate about 250 g of red meat, poultry, or processed meat a day (the size of one half-pound steak) gained more weight over five years, than those who ate less meat, even if they consumed the same amount of calories overall.

But isn’t it just bad for business?

And further on health issues, subbing a veggie burger for a hamburger is a no-brainer way to save a lot of calories. But the meat-weight relationship goes beyond calorie math. A study by Imperial College London found that those who ate more meat produced more methane than those who ate less meat, even if they consumed the same amount of calories overall.

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Biosphere Expeditions is in the media a lot. Below is a selection. A full overview is on ISSUU at http://issuu.com/biosphere-expeditions.

BBC Wildlife Magazine
Six page feature about Slovakia bear, lynx and wolf expedition
http://issuu.com/biosphere-expeditions/docs/sk-landderberge15

Land der Berge Magazin
Six page feature about Slovakia bear, lynx and wolf expedition
http://issuu.com/biosphere-expeditions/docs/sk-landderberge15

Tierwelt Magazine
Two page feature of Sumatra tiger expedition
http://issuu.com/biosphere-expeditions/docs/su-tierwelt15

Naturschutz Heute Magazin
Two page feature of Tien Shan snow leopard expedition
http://issuu.com/biosphere-expeditions/docs/ts-naturschutzheute15b

Lonely Planet Traveller Magazin
Feature article about volunteer travel with three recommended organisations, including Biosphere Expeditions.
http://issuu.com/biosphere-expeditions/docs/lonelyplanettravellerd15

Get It Magazine
Two page feature about Tien Shan expedition
http://issuu.com/biosphere-expeditions/docs/ts-getit15

Die Presse
Full-page spread of Sumatra tiger expedition
http://issuu.com/biosphere-expeditions/docs/su-diepresse14
CLIPPINGS 2015

Wildside Magazine
Four page feature about Slovakia expedition
http://issuu.com/biosphere-expeditions/docs/sk-wildside15

Hagenbeck Magazin
Double page spread about Biosphere Expeditions and its South Africa leopard expedition
http://issuu.com/biosphere-expeditions/docs/za-hagenbeck15

Outdoor UAE Magazine
Three page feature about Arabia expedition
http://issuu.com/biosphere-expeditions/docs/ar-outdooruae15

Wildside Magazine
Critical article about voluntourism written by Biosphere Expeditions staff.
http://issuu.com/biosphere-expeditions/docs/wildside15

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
Two page feature of Sumatra tiger expedition
http://issuu.com/biosphere-expeditions/docs/zu-faz15
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Biosphere Expeditions is an international non-profit conservation organisation registered in England, Germany, France, Australia and the USA.

Cover picture: Sunset in Costa Rica. © Biosphere Expeditions


Officially accredited member of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.