

ECO-TOURISM BOOM KEEPS THE WOLF FROM THE DOOR

Article by TREVOR BURTON, published in the Eastern Daily Press on 6 March 2001 and on EDP24 thereafter.

As the rain and snow tips down on a shivering Blighty the thoughts of many will not unnaturally turn to the appetising goal of a hard-earned holiday. A fortnight lazing around with a cold beer or several on a sun-kissed, babe-blessed or hunk-inhabited beach on the Costa-del-wherever.

Yet strange as it may seem such images do not conjure up everybody's idea of paradise – which is good news for a small Suffolk firm which is making its mark by whisking conservation enthusiasts all over the world on working adventure holidays. Far from the madding crowd the clients of Carlton Colville-based Biosphere Expeditions may find themselves joining forces with local scientists to gauge wolf populations in Poland, bird migration patterns in the Ukraine or even the human impact on frogs in the Amazonian forest.



UNDER THREAT: The work of Biosphere clients is helping to protect the grey wolf in the Carpathian mountains of Poland.

“The growth in general tourism is about 4pc, but in eco-tourism it's 10pc,” points out Dr Matthias Hammer, founder and field operations director of Biosphere Expeditions. “A lot of people want to tread lightly, but we always say they don't want to come back and tell people what they've seen but what they've done about it – the hands on involvement with a problem. It's a holiday with a conscience and that's the niche we fill.”

German-born Dr Hammer runs Biosphere's Suffolk base with his fiancée and co-director Katherine Wilden. They have a second office in Bavaria, and with one “floating” staff member the administration of the business is theoretically run by a five-strong workforce.

In practice, additional staff working out in the field take the total size of the team to around 25. Born in 1967, Dr Hammer is a former member of the German Parachute Regiment and Special Forces. He moved to the UK in the late 1980s to study biology as an undergraduate at St Andrews and Oxford, and biological anthropology as a graduate at Cambridge.

Dr Hammer moved to the region when a former girlfriend began working on Anglia TV's hit wildlife programme *Survival*, and admits that it was his then partner who inspired the idea for Biosphere. “We have been going for three years now,” said Dr Hammer. “I have always wanted to do expeditions since I was a student. One of the ways I saw myself doing it was as an academic, but when I did my PhD I realised I wanted to be more hands-on and someone suggested to me that I should make my hobby my business. I had had some small businesses to do with rowing, as I was a rower, and they said ‘You've got a knack for it’. It was one of those moments when I thought ‘Why didn't I think of that – what a great idea’ – and that was my academic career out of the window.”

Biosphere's first-ever expedition comprised a survey of medicinal plants in Brazil, and this was followed by a trip to Madagascar. The firm is currently involved in five long-term projects to which it can make a meaningful contribution over a period of time.

“For example, in Poland we go generally at the beginning and the end of winter,” said Dr Hammer, who will be there for much of March. “We are going out now to see how many wolf clubs have survived through winter because it's an important indicator of whether the wolf population is growing or reducing. We always go when we are needed, although the local scientists are there all the time.”

In addition to providing volunteer workers Biosphere sends an expedition leader on every project and contributes directly to the costs of the research. In effect, says Dr Hammer, it is the volunteers' presence.

contribution and work that constitute the reasons the work can be done at all. "We can provide people with financial help and with people to help with their research. A large proportion – probably half to two-thirds of the money we charge – we circulate and spend locally," said Dr Hammer. "It pays for the scientists, pays for their room and board, and so on."



TRACKING: A volunteer searches for wolves.

It also helps provide a equipment. For example, a nightsight – binoculars which can be used in the dark – are essential to wolf monitoring projects in the Ukraine, but are hardly cheap at £2000 a time. Biosphere now caters for around 100 clients a year, with teams typically comprising between four and eight people. They will typically pay around £1000 for a two-week expedition – although in total they will pay substantially more as air fares are not included, with volunteers expected to find their own way to a team assembly point in the host country.

"The reason we do that is because our teams come from all over the world," said Dr Hammer. "We couldn't possibly organise flights from America, Germany, the UK and other countries. People have their own choice doing their own organising and they can look for bargains if they want."

There is little doubt that once the adventure has begun these are holidays with a difference, with ordinary people able to directly benefit the planet's wildlife. In Bolivia, for example, expeditions work to estimate the population of spectacled bear, puma, Andean cat and Andean deer in the mountains of the Cotapata National Park. Volunteers search for indicators of the animals' presence, including tracks, scratch marks, kills, skin and fur. Each discovery is mapped, and some samples are sent away for DNA analysis to identify individuals.

The work could not take place without its volunteers, yet it is crucial to estimating population densities, without which any kind of conservation work becomes extremely difficult. In the Carpathian mountains of the Bieszczady National Park, in Poland, the job is to help protect the grey wolf. The local hunting lobby argues that there are about 150 individuals in the area, and insists that 50 should be culled by tourist hunters who will pay handsomely for the privilege.

The only drawback is that the local biologists with whom Biosphere is working put the total figure closer to 50 – the number to be culled." The growing popularity of Biosphere's expeditions means Dr Hammer is planning a modest expansion of the firm's administrative capacity, and he is increasingly able to set up partnerships with other groups such as Land Rover and outdoor clothing specialist Patagonia.

These partners may provide services in exchange for the opportunity to send members of their management on Biosphere expeditions, which are seen as invaluable in terms of personal development.

It appears that Dr Hammer has indeed succeeded in making a business of his hobby. While Biosphere thrives, the company's self-imposed "Earth Tax" of 1pc of its annual profits – donated to conservation projects via the Royal Geographical Society – offers further evidence of its founder's dedication to the cause. "It's a dream come true," said Dr Hammer. "I have always wanted to do this from the first time mv

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dad took me on my first natural history trail expedition in the forest when I was a boy. I read the boys' literature and it just stuck with me."

And while Biosphere's expeditions have provided its clients with some memories to last a lifetime, Dr Hammer is happy to report that there have so far been no disasters – even if some over-enthusiastic volunteers did go perilously close to becoming a brown bear's breakfast. "In Poland, people want to see a wolves but we try to make it perfectly clear that it's not a safari –it's research," says Dr Hammer.

"The chances of seeing a wolf in the Ukraine is higher because you're in hides. The chances of seeing a wolf in Poland are quite low. It's tracking them – then they end up tracking you because they're better at it. Most people don't see a wolf in Poland, but we had some people who were very keen to see a wolf or a bear and they planned to go into a bear's cave while it was hibernating. Fortunately, we heard what they were up to and were able to stop it.

"It's extremely dangerous and stupid to wake up a bear in hibernation. At first they're very disorientated, like a lot of people are grumpy when they get out of bed – and then they're very hungry!"

Perhaps that sun-kissed beach might be a better bet for some after all...