

FREQUENT FLYER MATTHIAS HAMMER

This professional conservationist travels the world to save nature.

Q How important is travel to you?

A It's part of my job and I love meeting new people and exploring new places. The best part is I have a real sense of purpose connected with my travels.

Q What are some of your current research projects?

A Arabian leopards in Oman, big cats in Namibia, coral reefs in the Caribbean, wolves in Poland, birds in the Spanish Pyrenees, jungle wildlife in the Peru Amazon, jaguars in Brazil and chamois and bears in Slovakia.

Q How did it come about that a cheetah woke up in your arms?

A We sedated it to put on a radio collar and gave it a low dosage (of tranquilliser) to minimise stress. But as I was carrying it to a wake-up spot under a tree it woke. It wasn't a problem, though, because the poor fellow was too drugged to notice, so I just kept on walking him to his tree while he gave me a wide-eyed, incredulous stare. It's a shame that no one took a picture of that eyeballing moment!

Q Have you had to use your skills as a survival instructor in other situations?

A We've been stuck out in storms or on a mountain ledge but we've never had a death or serious accident on an expedition.

Q Do you ever despair for some species and habitats?

A It's hard not to get frustrated but then you can only try to change things within your sphere of influence. It's often a slow process in the face of overwhelming odds. But we've had a protected area for snow leopards declared in the Altai Republic and whale protection guidelines accepted by European governments. This makes it all worthwhile.

Q What are the three most essential items to take on an expedition?

A I believe in the principle of "carry less by knowing more", so apart from a passport, credit card and a locket round my neck with some items close to my heart, I don't have an essentials list. The more unencumbered by gadgets and possessions, the better.

Interview by Robert Upe



Dr Matthias Hammer is managing director of non-profit Biosphere Expeditions, which runs conservation trips. The company is established in North America and Europe and he is in Australia to set up an office in Melbourne. See biosphere-expeditions.org.