



Dr Matthias Hammer is founder and field operations director of Biosphere Expeditions, a non-profit organisation that offers hands-on wildlife-conservation expeditions. **Siân Wherrett** talks to him about the company's origins, philosophy and future

How did Biosphere Expeditions begin?

Why did you decide to found it?

It started in 1999. While I was working on my PhD at Cambridge, I realised that there are lots of scientists out there with interesting projects, but without funds or people to help them. On the other hand, there are lots of people in Europe and North America who want to do more than roast on a beach on their holiday. I wanted to bring the two together.

What is your background?

I studied biology at Oxford and then went on to Cambridge to work on a PhD on human evolution. I had organised several student expeditions and also had a stint in the German Parachute Regiment, so I felt I could do this. I had no idea about things like accounting and PR, but went on courses to find out.

Today, many organisations offer 'eco-friendly travel'. What makes Biosphere unique?

The fact that Biosphere minimises its impact and behaves in an eco-friendly way is so much a part of an expedition that we don't even promote it. We go much further than the eco-friendly label. With us, you're part of a genuine research team doing genuine conservation work – successes, failures, warts and all. One expedition team in Namibia may see seven cheetahs in a fortnight and trap and radio-collar four of them, the next might not see any. That's how nature works and we don't put any gloss on it. We also write up our scientific results and budgets, and publish papers in the

scientific literature wherever possible, so everyone gets to see the contribution they've made and where their money went.

How do you select your projects?

Scientists from all over the world approach us regularly. We then go through a lengthy process of assessing the project and its suitability for sending teams. Not many projects make it, but those that do speak for themselves. We're always keen to hear from field workers with exciting projects.

Do you have a location/project of which you're particularly fond?

I am often asked that question and the honest answer is no, not really. The projects are so diverse and all of them have their highlights. The Altai mountains of Central Asia are stunningly beautiful, but the snow leopards we study there are very elusive. In Sri Lanka, you see and study elephants almost every day and are very close to the animals, but it can be quite hot and sticky. Same for Peru, where there are monkeys, macaws and other animals galore, but the climate can be a challenge, especially when you're cutting a transect trail through the jungle with a machete.

What do you think is the company's biggest achievement thus far?

We've added many pieces to the puzzle that is wildlife conservation and research. The puzzle will probably never be finished, but one of my highlights was when the Polish government

reversed a decision to cull wolves in the Carpathians, partly based on data that we'd gathered. As you can imagine, that gave everyone involved a real buzz.

What measures do you take to minimise your projects' effects on the environment?

Our minimum-impact policy is split into environmental, social and economic responsibilities. These policies are detailed and extensive, but to give you an example, we always work closely with local people and scientists, as well as recruiting as much labour as possible, and buying all our produce, locally.

Who signs up for your expeditions?

We've had team members of up to 82 years of age from all over the world and from all sorts of backgrounds. There really isn't a typical team member, and that makes the experience even more enriching – for example, we've had people of ten different nationalities in an expedition team of 12.

What are your thoughts regarding commercial travel companies?

We're not in the business of rubbing others, but clearly mass tourism and associated phenomena are problems. People will always travel, some with more thought as to their impact than others. Within our small sphere of influence we feel the best we can do is to try to harness this spirit of adventure and channel it into something that generates tangible benefits for the area in which we work, the local people with whom we work and the animals for which we work.

How would you like to see the travel industry change?

As I would like to see the world in general change – in small steps starting at your own level. The people reading this magazine are probably warm, well fed, safe and not suffering from a debilitating infectious disease. That, in itself, is quite a lucky position to be in. When I'm in the UK, I'm so removed from the natural world that it's difficult to be aware of the impact my lifestyle is having. Awareness and a dose of humility about how good we have it are the first positive steps towards change.

What is your latest project?

We've recently launched an elephant research and conservation project in Sri Lanka and are looking at projects in Oman and in our own backyard in the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads.

More info: www.biosphere-expeditions.org