

Eco hero Dr Matthias Hammer, conservation project organiser

Dr Matthias Hammer is the founder and managing director of Biosphere Expeditions, a volunteer organisation that works alongside scientists on international conservation projects. Interview by Faith Bradbury. Photograph by Brijesh Patel

I always aspired to be like David Attenborough. I came over to Britain from Germany, where I grew up, to study biology at Oxford and for a PhD at Cambridge. Then it hit me that academia wasn't really what I wanted – it was a lot of pen pushing, and a real 'publish or perish' world.

I organised student expeditions at Oxford, and when someone said to me, 'Why don't you get people to pay you to go on expeditions?' it was a moment of revelation. I started looking at volunteering and decided to set up my own volunteer conservation organisation. We take groups of eight to 12, from thirtysomethings to the over-sixties, from all over the world.

We're not a travel agency. What we do is not contrived. Biosphere's slogan is 'Experience conservation in action'. We do go to interview locals about snow leopards, we do go with bush trackers to track cheetahs. We are integrated into the local community.

I don't want to be Earthwatch with a hundred projects; I like to provide a few quality experiences. From December onwards we're going to have taster weekends in the UK where people will come to one of the national parks, such as the Norfolk Broads, and try a weekend to feel what it's like to be on an expedition.

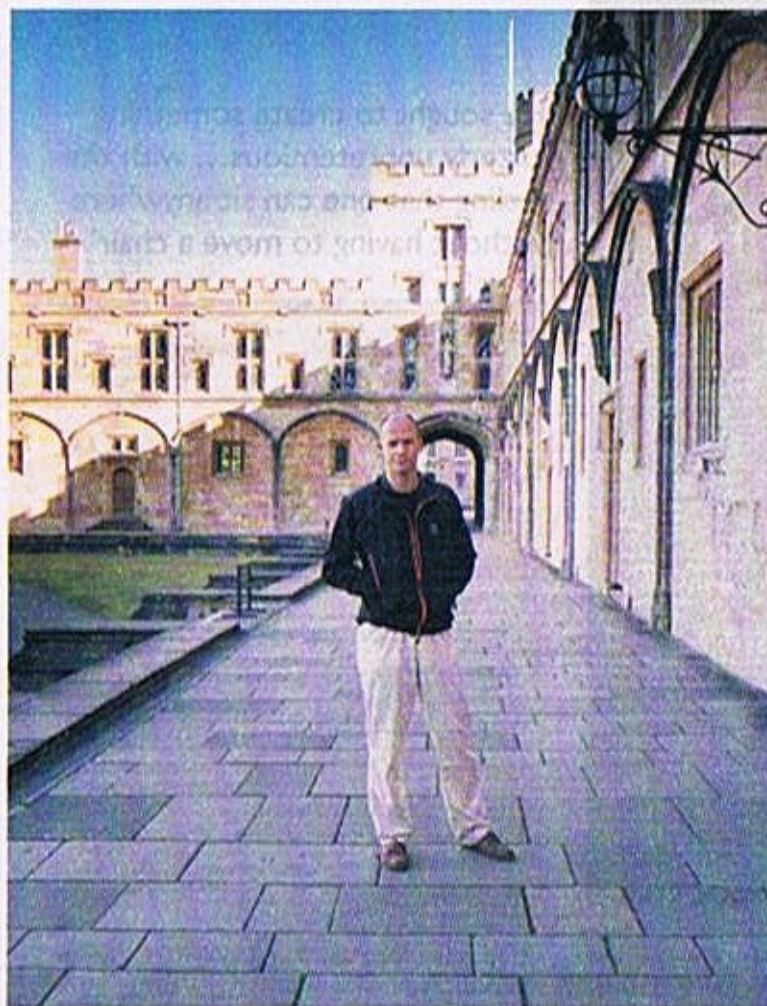
One of our very tangible results was that our five-year project in Poland helped prevent a proposed wolf cull. There was an argument between the hunting lobby and the conservationists. As an outside body, we conducted an independent survey and our data showed that there weren't many wolves around. The result was that no hunting licences were offered.

To begin with I used my university contacts to find research projects, but now I get roughly 100 e-mails a year offering us projects. We have nine on the go at the moment, varying from assisting with the international coral reef survey in Honduras, to tracking the endangered chamois (mountain goat) in the Tatra mountains in Slovakia. In the Altai, we are providing data to create a national park. We've done the same in the Ukraine.

The people we want to attract are people who have always wondered what it's like to be a field biologist. I say to people, you've seen David Attenborough on the television and the amazing things that he does. Now get out of your armchair and experience it yourself. Our volunteers provide help on two levels, with both funding and manpower.

We always publish an expedition report six to 12 months after an expedition. The report is written by the scientists and includes conservation recommendations and a budget showing how much money we've earned from volunteers' contributions. We guarantee that at least two-thirds of our expedition contribution income is spent in the country itself.

For me to feel I am making a difference to people's lives and the survival of animals in the field – there really is nothing better.
biosphere-expeditions.org



Matthias Hammer recommends...

Responsible tourism The argument that we shouldn't fly is ludicrous; consider the benefits tourism brings to areas. In many countries, the only thing keeping the chainsaws from the rainforest is people going to visit it. You cut this off, it's going to be made into matchsticks. But make sure you go with a responsible operator that puts back benefits into the local community. Try responsibletravel.com. **My locally run** and owned organic food store in Hoechberg, Germany.

