

# 20 YEARS OF ANECDOTES

**B**iosphere Expeditions is a sum of many parts. It is what it is because of the many people we have met on our 20-year journey. These are partners, scientists, friends, staff and people from around the globe who have joined us in the name of citizen science, and the conservation of wildlife and wilderness. Here are just a few of their stories and memories.



*For me, the memories are of people and of hot places. Serious people sitting on verandas, around campfires, on boats, on beaches and in tents – serious people talking and laughing, sharing stories and beliefs, and all of them enjoying their lives while struggling to do good. Passion and humour – a winning formula for life.*

*Kathy Gill, co-founder  
and strategy adviser*



*Greater kudu, springbok, Cape porcupine, lappet-faced vulture (Namibia); Risso's dolphin, common dolphin, Cory's shearwater, blue whale (Azores); hoatzin, pink-footed tarantula, pygmy marmoset, fer-de-lance (Peru); Arabian oryx, sand gazelle, MacQueen's bustard,*

*Cheesman's gerbil (UAE); Siberian ibex, Menzbier's marmot, large keeled Apollo butterfly, golden eagle (Kyrgyzstan); leatherback turtle, brown-throated three-toed sloth, striped basilisk lizard, bare-throated tiger heron (Costa Rica); leopard tortoise, Cape grysbok, sengi, malachite sunbird (South Africa). Not all spectacular, not all headline-grabbing, but all to be treasured on our fragile planet. I've been fortunate enough to see all of these animals in the wild, thanks to Biosphere Expeditions. I have also had the privilege of working with brilliant, dedicated scientists and met many wonderful local people and fellow citizen scientists from around the world who share my values about the environment and wildlife. I am so grateful to Biosphere Expeditions for providing these opportunities in a safe and satisfying way.*

*Neil Goodall, citizen scientist*



*My experience with Biosphere Expeditions started in 2004 in the Peruvian Amazon, where I was doing a PhD on parrots. I had no salary and no big research grant, so Biosphere Expeditions was a godsend: there was a stipend and a legion of assistants, many of whom were older and more qualified than me in terms of wildlife monitoring. Their assistance, insights, help and advice steered me along the path of a successful PhD. More to the point, it was also fun: a shared*

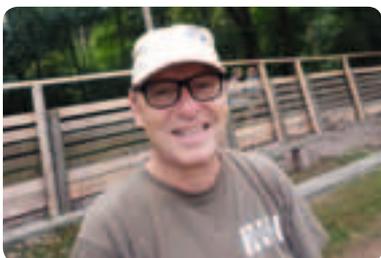
*adventure. Since 2015 and back in my native South Africa, citizen scientists have been helping me to monitor a range of wildlife on the Blue Hill Nature Reserve. The leopard is one flagship species, but there have been many other highlights from affiliated activities: understanding potential food dynamics of small mammals, capturing the first-ever endangered Hottentot Buttonquail, monitoring bats, honeybush and wildlife in the Karoo. The challenge in South Africa is that nowadays it is extremely difficult to get students who are willing to rough it in the wild to answer biodiversity-related questions. One of the values of Biosphere Expeditions is that we are able to draw on a pool of highly motivated, diverse and talented people that help answer important research questions. I can't thank you all enough for this. Your efforts are critical and much appreciated.*

*Dr. Alan Lee, expedition scientist  
Amazonia & South Africa*



*Working as an expedition leader has given me so many magical wildlife experiences. Here's an example: there is nothing quite like being on hatchery duty on the Costa Rica leatherback sea turtle expedition, checking the nests every 20 minutes throughout the night, looking for predators and new hatchlings, fully expecting a stray crab or two and instead seeing the frantic bubbling of the sand, which indicates that a clutch of baby turtles is on its way to the surface. All of a sudden the quiet of the night is filled with excitement as we measure and release a new generation of leatherback sea turtles.*

*Ida Vincent, expedition leader*



*I came across Biosphere Expeditions in 2004 when joining my first expedition on the Azores. This had such an influence on me that I decided to join many more expeditions afterwards, eventually becoming the President of the Friends of Biosphere Expeditions ...and still have not had enough ;) Well done and all the best to Biosphere Expeditions for the next 20/40/100 years!*

*Sven Strohschein, President  
of the Friends of Biosphere Expeditions*



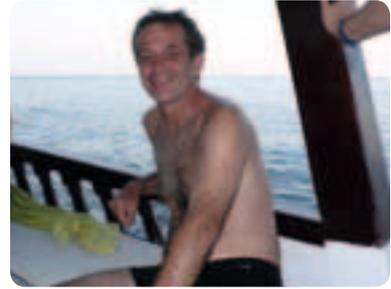
*I attended the Arabia expedition in 2017. I can clearly remember the day I met the saw-scaled viper. My team mates and I were so excited! I remember the baby oryx that was born the day we arrived, passing by it every day, and trying to detect any change to how it looked. I remember searching for scorpions and star gazing in the heart of the desert while celebrating my birthday. After going home, I longed for the warmth of the campfire and that bunch of people gathered in the middle of nowhere, trying to fix a tiny spot on the planet.*

*Samar Fahmy, local placement  
on the Arabia desert expedition 2017*



*Just one of many fabulous memories over many years of attending expeditions is creating a sauna while at base camp on the Altai expedition many moons ago. We made a makeshift sauna by heating up a pile of stones and then borrowing the storage tent. We lifted the tent off the supplies and walked it across to our pile of heated stones; worked like a dream. Next step was to dash to the river and dunk in the nearby pool for the full sauna experience. The water was so cold my breath was stolen from my lungs and I couldn't get out even a squeak! Many congratulations and thank you Biosphere Expeditions. Looking forward to another 20 years.*

*Georgina Treherne, citizen scientist*



*Reef Check began collaborating with Biosphere Expeditions in 2006 in Cayos Cochinos, Honduras. Our goals of conservation, research and education were overlapping as was the mechanism of 'immersion learning' and science-based management of ecosystems. We were impressed with the care and detail Biosphere Expeditions staff applied to engaging their participants in the projects. Later, when Dr. Matthias Hammer suggested that we plan an expedition to Oman, I thought he was a crazy big-cat ecologist. I had worked in the Arabian Gulf previously and there was not a lot of exciting reef there. So I was pleasantly surprised to see the good condition of the reefs along the Musandam coast featuring high coverage of living coral, lots of species and interesting fish not found in other parts of the world. Ultimately, this became a three-way partnership with Dr. Jean-Luc Solandt of the Marine Conservation Society who lent his scientific expertise to the expeditions in Oman and the Maldives. Matthias and his staff were able to 'sell' active participation in marine conservation to a niche market of dedicated ecologically-minded individuals. Some of the 'profits' have been used to cover the costs of scholarships for members of the local communities, so that they could participate and also become engaged in a longer-term process of marine conservation. The success of this approach is evident in the establishment of locally managed Reef Check organisations, establishment of Marine Protected Areas and improved conservation in both the Maldives and Oman. So in 2016 we celebrated the 10th year of our collaboration and now the 20th anniversary of Biosphere Expeditions. Congratulations! We look forward to expanding to new coral reef areas and continuing to improve coral reef conservation outcomes.*

*Dr. Gregor Hodgson,  
Reef Check Foundation*



*The Altai expedition was the best thing that happened to me for my career development. I had waited for a long time to get to this part of my country and the expedition gave me the opportunity. Once I saw Chuyskaya Steppe and the great Chikhachova Ridge, I loved them with all my heart, and I became familiar with that place. It set me on a path to start guiding bird-watching tours in that area. I have found the job of my dreams! And I have you to thank Biosphere Expeditions for it!*

*Elena Shnayder, local placement  
on the Altai snow leopard expedition 2012*



*Many moons ago, in fact it was 2002, I remember a cheetah waking up from sedation in my arms. I was grinning like a Cheshire cat when our scientist let me carry the animal into the shade of a tree for recovery. On the way to the tree, he (I think he was a male) opened his eyes and looked at me somewhat puzzled, too drunk from the sedation to do anything. Our scientist told me not to panic and carry on, so I did, placing him carefully in the shade. I remember him staggering to his feet eventually and attempting a drunken, wavy getaway into the bushes. The memory has stayed with me as one of many.*

*Matthias Hammer,  
executive director and founder*



*I started out as an expedition participant on a couple of expeditions in 2007 and began working for Biosphere Expeditions soon after. There are so many unique experiences gained over the decade since. I remember well one of my early projects: the creation of the 10 year anniversary magazine, which started our annual magazine tradition. And also how nervous I was about leading my first expedition in 2008. Since then, I have been privileged to experience many unique and remote places. I have*

*worked together with and have met all kinds of interesting people from all over the globe and faced challenges of all sorts. I froze in my steps in the Amazon rainforest at the call of a jaguar nearby, was arrested for a day by the Russian border police during a recce mission in the Altai mountains, found our Caprivi base camp surrounded by hundreds of buffalo grazing in the morning mist, celebrated a family event in a yurt in the Tien Shan mountains of Kyrgyzstan and was introduced to the shaman of a small village in the Amazon. There are two things all these stories boil down to: people and nature. That's what the most vivid memories are made of. Leading a random bunch of people and seeing them become a true expedition team within days; making friends with local people despite language and other barriers; enjoying the peace and freedom of an early morning out in the desert, the sounds of the rainforest at night or the breathtaking view from my tent pitched in the high mountains. Congratulations Biosphere Expeditions - to a concept and a mission that never fails to inspire me - and so many others too.*

*Malika Fettak,  
Biosphere Expeditions staff member*



*Standing on one of the ridges of the Alaa-Too range in Kyrgyzstan's Tien Shan mountains gives you goose bumps. Not only because of the stunning views over the shimmering glaciers, but also because this is snow leopard terrain. Accompanying the scientists doing their field work at altitudes of 3500+ metres not just helps you understand why the snow leopard is one of the most endangered cats in the world; it also hammers home why it is so important to protect these beautiful animals. Carry on with your great work, Biosphere Expeditions! And congratulations for your 20th anniversary.*

*Fabian von Poser, journalist*



*I work at a Biosphere Expeditions research station. My job is to run the station so that citizen scientists from Biosphere Expeditions can concentrate on research work that helps to protect the livestock in our communities and to manage predators. This is my first job and I am very grateful as there is little work in our area. I am also very grateful for the work that the citizen scientists are doing. Since their arrival I haven't lost any cattle to lions and hyenas. My cattle are very important to me and my family. Thank you for your support.*

*Simon Naha, Biosphere Expeditions staff*

*I joined the Peru expedition back in 2001 when I was a zoology student at Bristol University. Ever since I can remember, I dreamed of one day visiting the rainforest, so this expedition literally was a dream come true. I remember having to pinch myself as we travelled by boat to our camp on the first day, just to convince myself I really was there! Now, years on from my expedition, I'm working as a researcher and writer for a charity who are at the heart of the wildlife media industry, and I love every minute of it. My expedition with Biosphere Expeditions all those years ago really started everything off, giving me both the inspiration and the experience needed to get into the wonderful and exciting world of wildlife conservation.*

*Liz Shaw (right), citizen scientist*





*I wanted take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Biosphere Expeditions for a big contribution to my life. I was recently accepted for a graduate course at Berea College in Kentucky. When writing an essay for the application, I included descriptions of all my social activities on ecology, democracy and human rights. I also mentioned my participation in the Tien Shan expedition and its contribution to the conservation of snow leopards. I was later told that this played a big role in the selection process. So I would like to express my deepest gratitude one more time.*

*Yrskeldi Emilbekov,  
local placement on the Tien Shan  
snow leopard expedition 2017*



*20 years! 20 years of a vision, of involvement and excitement, of creating and implementing projects, of conservation. Congratulations Biosphere Expeditions! And thank you for involving me since 2004. I started as 'Mr. Telemetry' in Namibia, then led expeditions on tracking snow leopards in the Altai; Arabian leopard in Oman; wolf, bear, lynx in Slovakia. Then, starting in 2017, I became the expedition scientist on the Germany wolf project, realising a long-standing dream, proudly supporting official wolf monitoring efforts. My unforgettable moments include the nocturnal sounds of elephants, encounters with wild animals as well as many enthusiastic people. And most enjoyable of all: meeting people again and again on expeditions when they come back – like old friends!*

*Peter Schuette,  
expedition leader and scientist*



*I first joined Biosphere Expeditions in Musandam (Oman) in 2015 as a local placement and then went to other reef expeditions. This encouraged me to get more involved and help with establishing an NGO (Reef Check Oman) in my country to empower local communities and Omani civil society to protect their own reefs. With the continued support from Biosphere Expeditions I hope that we will soon see Marine Protected Areas established in Oman and the health of our corals and threats to them addressed by our government. Thank you very much for your support Biosphere Expeditions; Reef Check Oman would not exist without it. And congratulations for your 20 year anniversary. I hope there will be many more.*

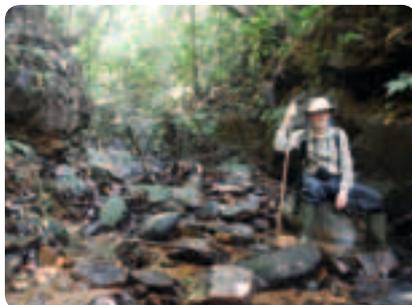
*Jenan Anwar Al Asfoor, local placement  
and head of Reef Check Oman*



*Way back in – I think – 2006, I travelled with Matthias and a group of adventurers younger than me into Oman to look for signs of the Arabian leopard. We drove up into a mountainous region where these critically endangered animals were rumoured to live, then started to walk. I say walk, it was more of a scramble as we climbed for what felt like hours up the side of this barren, sun-baked, rock strewn mountain.*

*I still have nightmares where I hear Matthias' voice calling "Not far now – keep going – you're nearly there". To my shame after two hours or so, with my leg muscles screaming for mercy, I lay down on a large flat rock and told the rest to carry on and collect me on the way down. After another hour or so the group staggered back to my resting rock – they hadn't seen any signs of the leopards – I on the other hand had discovered a colony of large ants on my rock – which I assumed, given the altitude, were a rare subspecies of Alpine Mountain Ants. In my subsequent nightmares when I wander back to that trip, I'm sure those damned ants were wearing oxygen bottles on their backs. "Keep going Matthias – you're nearly there!"*

*John Lloyd,  
sponsorship manager at Land Rover*



*My first trip (sorry, expedition) was in 2003 to the Altai mountains to survey snow leopards. I returned there ten times and also went to the Tien Shan mountains (for snow leopards again), Scotland (cetaceans), Sumatra (tigers), Slovakia (wolves, bears and lynx), Germany (wolves) and the Azores (whales & dolphins). Every one has had something memorable – ranging from being nearly arrested in the Altai Republic for stall-*

*ing a Land Rover on a motorway, being stopped by an armed Russian army patrol on a mountain pass in the Altai for possibly smuggling sheep, being searched by another patrol for getting too near the Mongolian border, snowshoeing for the first time in snow a metre deep in Slovakia, wading waist-deep up streams in Sumatra, being on deck for hours in force 8 gales off Skye, winning the expedition leader's 4x4 out of Russian marshes, surveying for wolves on the Luenberg Heath in Saxony with the sound of tank and heavy machine gun fire in the background from a nearby shooting range, to drinking lots of bowls of fermented mare's milk (kumis) in yurts in Kyrgyzstan. I can't say every minute was thoroughly enjoyable (particularly the kumis), but every minute has been worthwhile, for research and for me – truly inspirational. Great stuff Biosphere – keep it up!*

*Peter Pilbeam, citizen scientist*



*I started working with Biosphere Expeditions in 2011 as the expedition scientist for the Maldives expedition to start with and extending to the Musandam project later. During this time we've achieved much: Over 100 divers trained as Reef Check EcoDivers, two community-based NGOs, five Maldivians and two Omanis to the level where they can train others themselves. Some have gone on to start exciting careers in science, consultancies and tourism. We've produced many reports, and offered calls for Marine Protected Areas and other management measures, some of which have been heeded. Perhaps most importantly of all, local people enjoy their training and value our collective contributions to a better understanding of reef health and resilience in the face of multifarious threats. Congratulations to Biosphere Expeditions for all they have achieved in coral reef and other wildlife conservation issues.*

*Dr. Jean-Luc Solandt,  
Marine Conservation Society, UK*



*I first found out about Biosphere Expeditions while working on a Masters degree and living in Kyrgyzstan. A friend told me that there was a group doing snow leopard research, and that maybe I could jump in and do some of my research on the side. After two seasons of being a placement, I figured I would ask if they had any openings for expedition leaders. Now I have led the Tien Shan expedition two years in a row and have been hired as an assistant professor at a local university here in Kyrgyzstan as a result of the butterfly research I have done in conjunction with the Biosphere Expeditions snow leopard project. So thank you Biosphere Expeditions for having such a big impact on the opportunities I have had since joining as a placement in 2015. Here's to 20 more successful years!*

*Amadeus De Kastle, local placement  
and expedition leader*



*It was 2006 when I signed up for my Biosphere Expeditions trip. It made me feel ALIVE. So alive in fact that I decided to do a one-year course in Experiential Education and Outdoor Training. Now I organise outdoor summer camps for kids in state care in my native Hungary. It is amazing to see the changes in these children during the time we spend in the forest – how they become more self-confident as they face the challenges provided by nature, and how they become more open as we sit around the evening fire and tell stories under the star-filled sky. I hope I can take many more people – young and adult – to wild places and let them experience their life-changing effects. Just as my first Biosphere Expeditions journey changed my life too.*

*Laura Balazs, citizen scientist*



*As I emerged from Windhoek airport one morning in November 2002 to start my first expedition, I could hardly have known that this was going to be one of those moments*

*in life that would be the start of a significant journey in so many ways. The following 16 years have seen me take part in 14 expeditions encompassing 11 countries and four continents as well as being the first President of the Friends of Biosphere. So many memories crowd in to my mind now, but one stands out particularly. On the very first expedition to the Altai Republic in July 2003 our group discovered a set of fairly fresh snow leopard tracks and I recall staring in awe at them with a feeling of complete exhilaration.*

*Martyn Roberts, citizen scientist and alumnus President of the Friends of Biosphere Expeditions*



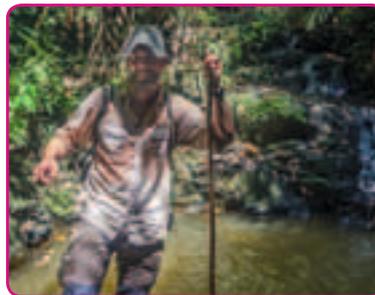
*So many stories – I could probably write a book! My most unforgettable memory though was jumping into a warm dark Arabian sea, and accidentally stirring up a glistening soup of bioluminescent phytoplankton. Every movement of my limbs, every somersault of my body triggered a spectacular 3D light show of neon-blue iridescence. Below me were shimmering schools of mackerel, their sculptural formations punctured by swift, predatory needle fish creating pure explosions of light. In that moment I was subsumed, existing in another world. Magical!*

*Catherine Edsell, expedition leader*



*Although over the years I have been on many expeditions, the one that really sticks in my mind is my first expedition to Slovakia in 2004. I learnt so many new skills in a short space of time, met some amazing people, explored a beautiful part of the world and I never thought I'd enjoy looking for scat so much! I was even given the nickname 'scat girl' as I seemed to have an eagle eye for spotting poo!*

*Katie Bunting, citizen scientist*



*A meeting in the middle of somewhere. Or rather in Puerto Maldonado, gateway to the Amazonian rainforest, at a certain date, a*

*certain time and in a certain hotel. I was excited, because the appointment had a taste of adventure, something like the first meeting between Livingstone and Stanley. It worked and I was on my first project with Biosphere Expeditions, documenting macaws and other rainforest wonders. It was fantastic and persuaded me that theirs was a good concept. Doing serious and important work with enthusiastic volunteers. That was in 2002 and since then I have written many times about various Biosphere Expeditions projects. But I will always remember my first contact.*

*Peter Laufmann, journalist*

More memories and stories at  
[www.biosphere-expeditions.org/testimonials](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/testimonials)  
[www.biosphere-expeditions.org/placements#stories](http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/placements#stories)  
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