

## JOHN GRAINGER

### Southampton University 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary blog - a sort of annotated CV

Southampton University wasn't my first choice, in fact I didn't have any particular preference for a university, or even a course, when I was applying in 1967. All I "knew" was that university was the next step but having done English, Geography and Biology for A levels I was rather confused as to what subject area interested me the most. My UCCA form reflected this confusion as I ended up applying to 6 different universities with courses as varied as African and Asian development studies, or some such, at trendy University of Sussex, agricultural zoology at East Anglia, American literature at Warwick and Environmental Botany and Geography at Southampton. Unsurprisingly I wasn't offered even a conditional place at either Sussex or Southampton the only universities that deigned to interview me. The latter eventually graciously accepted me with my B and two C grades after my application went through "clearing", a process that matched the remaining unplaced (unwanted) candidates to remaining unfilled places.

So it was in 1967 that I pitched up at the residential tower of South Stoneham House to begin my academic career at Southampton University. Since the age of thirteen I had been at an all-boy Catholic school in Surrey where I was one of the few boarders as my parents were living in Kenya. So the liberation of living unsupervised was a heady experience, in many ways, and it was somewhat of a miracle that I managed to scrape through the first year exams which, with no retakes, resulted in the loss of one of our merry gang of 5 following the combined botany and geography course. The course we had embarked on was probably the only environmental degree offered anywhere and was essentially cobbled together from the botany, geography and geology syllabuses that entailed a considerable amount of work, with lots of labs and residential field trips. So maybe it was not surprising that only Mike Jackson, Stuart Christophers, Jane Elliman and I went onto the second year. Mike has written with affection and humour about the course, our various field trip adventures, tutors and social interactions with more perception and detail than I ever could – it was the sixties and I really can't reliably recall all that much! I did enjoy my time at university immensely and became socially more comfortable with the opposite sex; I somehow met Teresa who was studying at the LSU teacher training college and after a few false starts, we became a couple. In 1970 I was rather surprised and delighted to eventually graduate with a respectable 2.1 degree.

I had still no real idea what I wanted to do but I liked university life and thought that it should continue. I had notions of working abroad as I had been born and raised in Kenya so I applied to University of Reading to do a Masters degree in agricultural extension, but I couldn't get a grant and didn't have funds to finance the two year degree. However my tutor, Joyce Lambert, affectionately called Blossom by her students, offered me a junior position on her small research team working on numerical clustering techniques for plant ecology. I was flattered but not so enamored about clustering techniques so I turned down the offer. However then Joyce Lambert suggested that I submit a PhD research proposal that better matched my interests and apply for a research scholarship from the university. Astonishingly I was successful and in the autumn of 1970 embarked on an investigation into

the differing vegetation mapping techniques for the British Isles, in which I was to be jointly supervised by Joyce Lambert and the botany department at the University of Aberystwyth.

It was a disastrous arrangement (that is another story), but while it lasted I enjoyed the days walking over Plynlimon in the Welsh Cambrian Mountains. It was the walking that thankfully led to my research failing, as a long standing problem in my ankle became acutely evident and required surgery when it was discovered I had had a benign tumour in my ankle. So in 1971, with my remaining studentship held in abeyance, I went to Kenya for 6 months to recuperate with my parents and think about what I really wanted to do. I eventually returned to Southampton and embarked on a new project to use clustering techniques to structure and analyse grey scale data from scanned aerial photographs to investigate their use in large-scale vegetation survey. Though the ultimate application goal proved elusive my thesis was considered sufficiently weighty (in kilogrammes not conceptually) to justify the PhD, which I was awarded in 1977. My degree probably took a little longer than average, but I justified this to myself, and anyone who was remotely interested, by the fact that I had started the PhD twice! I had taken also time out to do short remunerative consultancies as my studentship had run out by the beginning of 1975. While I was writing up, I went to Japan where Teresa had fled two years earlier, to ask if she would marry me. We did get married in August 1975 while I was unemployed, trying to write up and working on a Manpower scheme to get unemployed post-graduates into work. I ended up walking the Avon and Stour rivers to identify biodiversity rich water meadows for conservation. Possibly the best job ever.

Finishing the PhD then threw up the dilemma of what to do. I reluctantly applied for a variety of UK based jobs but eventually I was invited by the British Council to take up a lecturing post in Iran they funded at the University of Tehran's Higher School of Forestry and Range Management in Gorgan – a sizeable market town on the southern shores of the Caspian Sea. I had a crash one-to-one Farsi (Persian) course and in November 1977 we arrived in Gorgan, where we the only resident foreigners, on a two year contract. I didn't really question the fact that I wasn't a trained teacher and knew little other than my research specialty but I taught photogrammetry, forest ecology and mensuration techniques in Farsi – through a translator though I was expected to master Farsi within the two years! We found ourselves lionized by the different sectors of Gorgan society, receiving competing invites to many functions. We became friends with Armenians, who threw riotous parties where the local godfather watched proceedings as petitioners whispered requests for favours in his ears. Wealthy Iranian landowners and businessmen, including the bank manager, invited us to their sumptuous homes to dine on sturgeon and caviar and when the tides of revolution started to lap around the town, to smoke opium in their Caspian villas. We visited the homes of Turkoman and who traded carpets and sheep in the markets around Gorgan and entered the yurts of Kazakhs out on the plains north of Gorgan towards the Soviet border. We also managed to journey through north-west Iran in the company of Manning Nash, a prominent anthropologist, and joined the University of Philadelphia's 1978 expedition to the wondrous Touran Desert in central Iran.

Regretfully I never did get to master Farsi as early in 1978 the first major rumblings of the Iranian revolution started, after years of simmering resentment towards the Shah's megalomania and his repressive regime. Throughout 1978 teaching was interrupted by

strikes and clashes between opposing factions, but we still had invitations to “come to dinner” between lulls in shooting. When the British Embassy finally realized that this was a popular and unstoppable revolution and advised us early 1979 to leave, it was a bit too late. By then all transport had stopped and petrol was severely rationed, so getting to Tehran 400 km away over the snow covered Alborz mountains would be problematic, especially as many of the towns on the main road were blockaded. Eventually in January 1979 we managed to get hold of enough petrol and, driving the school’s Land Rover, we managed to get to Tehran with the school’s Gestetner operator as a chaperon who wanted to try and find his activist brother in law who had recently been released from prison. We had spent time in his house where his 12-year old son repeatedly challenged and beat me at chess. We arrived in Tehran, after a journey when we hardly saw another vehicle on the road, to a full blown riot with buildings burning, trees laid across the road and crowds dressed in white challenging soldiers to shoot them by calling for the Shah’s death. We left next morning to the airport with tear gas in the air and the sound of gunshots in our ears, to be evacuated to Kuwait.

We spent 1979 marooned in Britain as the British Council was unduly optimistic that we could eventually return to Iran. But after reality kicked in I was offered a British Council funded post – actually the choice of three posts – in the Institute of Meteorology and Arid Land Studies, at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. I selected one of the posts though was tempted by two of them! In the meantime during this enforced period of paid leisure and in-between restoring my 1954 Triumph TR2, Teresa and I managed to conceive a baby, Alice, who arrived on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1979. In February 1980 we arrived in Jeddah, our arrival having been delayed by the recent siege of the Grand Mosque in Makkah, a harbinger of times to come – no we hadn’t learned to be cautious. We were installed in a university “guest house” where Alice spent her first few weeks sleeping in a drawer as a modified crib.

I was to teach basic ecology and arid range management to graduates who were to be employed at the new Meteorology and Environmental Protection Administration (MEPA). The problem was that there were no students for me to teach in my first semester there and then I only had half a course to teach in the second semester, so I spent time exploring and learning about the environments of the surrounding desert landscapes. When I did start to teach I was horrified to learn that none of the graduate students had never been in the university library, as everything was taught from a single course book and much of the learning was through rote memorization. Field instruction was also alien. Things improved later when the University of Arizona established a partnership with the Institute and teaching and research opportunities improved. I was engaged in establishing a herbarium, researching traditional range conservation practices (*hima* system) and exploring places with intact habitats and interesting biodiversity.

Jeddah suited us though. Teresa worked in the British School where Alice was a pupil and we had an active and interesting social life in the diverse expatriate community. In the absence of public entertainment we were obliged to create our own diversions. Teresa became involved in amateur theatre and I became chairperson of the Saudi Arabia Natural History Society. We learned to scuba dive and windsurf, and we spent many days exploring

the desert with friends; one trip along the historic Hejaz railway of T. E. Lawrence fame being particularly memorable.

In 1983 I left the Institute following disagreements over direction of travel, and because I had been invited to join MEPA to advise them on the identifying sites of conservation interest and controlling the large scale Haj trade in endangered species. So it was that IAL, a British Airways subsidiary that had a contract to modernize MEPA's meteorology section, reluctantly agreed to the Saudi's instruction to include me on their payroll. I was essentially left to my own devices as I didn't fit into the company's remit. So in the spirit of company solidarity, in May 1985 I arranged a three-week trip to the Empty Quarter with another IAL outsider. Doug was a maverick Australian engineer and navigator extraordinaire, who single-handedly serviced two very remote, and previously "lost" weather stations that he had relocated deep in this vast desert. The work required him driving an 800 km round trip deep into the sands every two months, a hazardous trip which he undertook completely alone and unsupported. I wanted to do ecological research and collect specimens (and have an adventure), but Doug was initially deeply sceptical of my proposal to come with him. It meant that I would have to travel independently because his Land Rover was already massively over-loaded with equipment and water. He needed to be persuaded I had sufficient desert driving experience to undertake the trip into this massive dune landscape where shade temperatures could exceed 50° C. It was of course an extraordinarily rewarding experience but it was overshadowed by the fact that on his following trip, which he should never have attempted in the hottest time of year, Doug didn't return.

At the time, MEPA had a trust fund agreement with IUCN to undertake an exhaustive survey of the Red Sea and Arabian Gulf biotopes with the aim of establishing a marine conservation strategy and an oil spill contingency plan. Subsequently a team of Australian Government scientists was deployed to assist MEPA in this initiative, but the terrestrial environments were largely ignored.

Luckily MEPA had an eminent Swiss entomologist, Wilhelm Buttiker, working for them as an independent adviser, and he and I struck up an enduring relationship whereby we spent many weeks together, exploring Saudi Arabia on formal work sanctioned expeditions and in our own time. Wilhelm collected insects and other fauna for description in the exemplary Fauna of Arabia series, including those that I had brought back from the Empty Quarter – one beetle turned out to be a new genus. I was assembling information on terrestrial habitats and sites of biodiversity conservation value. Wilhelm and I eventually compiled all this information into a provisional list of sites of high conservation value and in 1986, when a new Commission for wildlife conservation was established in Riyadh, I was seconded by MEPA to assist with its inception workshop and to develop its five-year plan. I eventually moved over to the Commission permanently in 1987 with some serious misgivings, as we had to leave friends and the pleasures of our beach lifestyle in Jeddah for the uncertain prospects of life under the stricter moral codes of Nejd society.

It turned out to be one of the most satisfying periods of my professional life. The Commission had very influential friends in high places and a generous budget supplemented by gifts from royal benefactors. Prince Saud al Faisal, the Foreign Minister, was the very effective and hands-on CEO. The arrangement allowed the Commission to undertake a

hugely ambitious programme of establishing protected areas and breeding endangered native wildlife species for re-introduction – particularly Arabian oryx, gazelles and houbara bustards. I had a signed letter from Saud al Faisal which permitted me to travel anywhere in the Kingdom and requested all assistance from officials! I was tasked with organizing a systematic Kingdom-wide survey to identify sites of priority conservation importance and provided with all necessary logistics including a fleet of fully equipped Land Cruisers vehicles, including Loran C navigation (precursor to GPS) which was highly restricted and generally only available to security personnel at the time. I was also able to arrange unlimited helicopter support from the Saudi Air Force to survey difficult or inaccessible terrain. I organized a major expedition to the Empty Quarter, fully supported by the Coast Guard and a Commission plane, but it couldn't match the adventure of my trip with Doug.

It was a golden period especially as in 1988 Graham Child, the ex-director of Zimbabwe Wildlife Service, was deployed as IUCN's senior adviser to the Commission. I was in the Farasan Island in the Red Sea when he arrived in Saudi but I went up to meet him in Riyadh, and two days later he was down in the Farasans beginning his work. He later told me that this was the best introduction to a work assignment he had ever had. Graham was seminal to the development and acceptance of the community based resource management paradigm when he conceived and implemented the CAMFIRE programme in Zimbabwe. It was a symbiotic partnership, as I learned from him a great deal on institutional arrangements for sustainable conservation management and I could provide him with knowledge of the local ecological and cultural context. Together we produced the national system plan for protected areas in Saudi Arabia – still regarded by IUCN as exemplary.

The first Gulf War broke out in August 1990 and January 1991 the largest oil spill in history began as a result of both deliberate action by Iraq and allied bombing. I was dispatched to the Gulf to liaise with MEPA, by now an institutional rival, on protection measures for sensitive sites. It was a frustrating, frightening and finally fruitless time attempting to secure any protection from oil impacts. Though immediately after the war, we managed to secure funding and military support to clean and restore the beaches of Karan Island, an important green turtle nesting site, and also deploy sprinklers to flush out oil from the large mangrove stand in the Bay of Abu Ali island. This latter site eventually became the hub of the Gulf Marine Sanctuary – so some belated satisfaction.

Following the Gulf War there was a noticeable shift towards a more fundamental mood in the Kingdom and as our daughter was approaching puberty, and the prospect of Alice having to wear an *abaya* at twelve, we decided to move on.

In 1992 I was recruited by IUCN to lead a protected area development project in Ghana where I spent an exhausting but exhilarating 28 months doing management planning surveys of 8 protected areas including Mole National Park. I loved Ghana and its people – their *joie de vivre* and high life music is infectious. Given a couple bottles of Guinness, a few spicy kebabs and a tape machine, a dozen Ghanaians will party all night. The project was hugely successful with two follow on projects funded by the World Bank. One grizzled, world weary World Bank official, when watching the Ghanaian counterparts present the project's outcomes at a public seminar, told me that he writes and extols the need for local capacity building into each project document, but this was the first time he had ever

witnessed it. Maybe it was the Ghanaians capacity to party he was referring to as I had taken him out to experience Accra's nightlife.

After Ghana I worked on some short term consultancies, firstly with the World Bank and IUCN in Sri Lanka where I assisted the development of community based management plans for forests in the Galle and Matara areas. Later I worked in Oman and Kuwait with IUCN and UNDP to develop national biodiversity strategies. This proved difficult in Kuwait when so much damage had been done by the spills and oil fires, and with the general neglect of the environment in the intervening years. I also took time out to research a book I wanted to write on Saudi Arabia – a draft still sits in my hard drive – hard being the operative word.

In 1996 I was recruited by ZSL as the project manager for a five year €6 million EU funded project in South Sinai to establish and develop the Saint Katherine Protectorate. This recently declared protectorate covered almost all of South Sinai's high mountains an area of about five thousand square kilometres, and centred on the Mt Sinai, or Gabal Musa, of Biblical renown. It included the Saint Katherine Monastery and other religious sites and several thousand Bedouin of various lineages lived within its boundaries. It also contained the small town of Saint Katherines where I was to be based for at least two years. My initial misgivings about taking the position were reinforced when I arrived in mid-February 1996 to this bitterly cold, litter strewn and sewerage drenched place. Hardly an auspicious start but I comforted myself with the thought that I would probably travel at least once a month to Cairo and I could mentally strike off the trips like a prisoner, knowing that by the time I got to twenty my "suffering" would nearly be over!

I subsequently extended my contract and the project implementation period (to 7 years) and eventually ended up staying on 'til early 2003, latterly as a volunteer for six months after my contract ended to see through the completion of a Visitor Centre that the local Bedouins built (recognized in the Phaidon Atlas of 21<sup>st</sup> century architecture). I had fallen in love with the place, its landscapes and people, and with the sheer exhilaration of putting into practice the things that I had learned from mentors and my own experience. It would take too long to explain everything that we tried and either succeeded or failed in, and the legacy that we tried to leave so I would refer anyone who is interested to look at the publication referenced below. Among our greatest successes were to meaningfully engage the local Bedouin community and have the core area of the Protectorate inscribed in the Cultural World Heritage list and

The time I spent in Saint Katherine were some of the happiest years of my professional life, but as my family was back in Bristol, UK my personal life unraveled and eventually Teresa and I formally separated. Teresa had obtained an Open University degree in Psychology and a diploma in special needs teaching from Bath University. Alice was enrolled at St Andrew's university where with little apparent effort she gained a 2.1 and the MA conferred by right on degree holders!

After Sinai I worked as a protected management adviser in Croatia on a GEF funded Karst Ecosystem project which was hugely enjoyable and fulfilling, before I returned to Egypt in 2004, this time to work on the Red Sea with USAID to establish the Wadi el Gemal National Park. Much of our time was spent trying to curb the voracious demands for land by tourism

developers, and promoting sustainable community based tourism initiatives, where we had some success.

I then took a “sabbatical” and went to southern Africa for a few weeks to reconnect with Graham Child and take a look at how they were running protected areas and conservancies in South Africa, Namibia and Botswana. It was an instructive experience and I started to contemplate moving to South Africa.

I was invited back to Egypt by IUCN in early 2005 to head up a capacity building project aimed at enhancing the institutional capacity of the Nature Conservation Sector for planning and implementing nature conservation activities. The project’s main objective was the transformation of the NCS from a central department of the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency into a properly resourced institution; able to manage a large protected area estate and be responsive to Egypt’s international obligations and emerging national biodiversity issues. Much like it works in Southern Africa!!

We had some successes with pilot parks, management and business planning. In the course of the project I worked with Robbie Robinson an ex-director of South African Parks and my old mentor Graham Child also participated in the effort to bring change. When the project ended, life at NCS went on much as before, bureaucrats anywhere don’t entertain change and Egyptian bureaucracy is particularly entrenched as a result of the successive entrenchment efforts of bureaucrats from the Pharonic, Greco-Roman, Turkish, British and latterly Egyptian eras!

It was during this time that I met up again with Susanne whose late husband, Pako, had been a friend of mine when I was working in Sinai. Susanne had lived in Malaysia for 8 years running a dive centre on Tioman Island. We eventually became a couple and she moved to Cairo from Sharm el Sheikh, where she was working on developing a large tourism management and booking portal for the Red Sea, where we lived in a lovely apartment in Zamalek overlooking the Nile. Alice had also moved to Cairo, to learn Arabic and work on an educational reform project, She lived on a delightful houseboat with Alfie, her cat, and various houseguests, or maybe house mariners.

I mostly enjoyed living in Cairo – its crowded craziness and 25 hour lifestyle suited me at the time and I had a wide circle of wonderful and interesting friends and acquaintances to explore the city’s underbelly. After a time though, the pell-mell, pollution and unchanging politics became wearisome. By now we had moved to the leafy suburbs of Maadi and I had been working as a freelance consultant and as a co-founder of Nature Conservation Egypt, which has blossomed into an effective, practical, and advocacy NGO. I also wrote and published a children’s book “The little Bambina of Cairo”.

Then, while taking a shower one morning I was contacted by the new secretary general of the Saudi Wildlife Authority, asking me to return as his personal adviser. Dripping, I agreed on the condition I would work 3 weeks a month and return to Egypt or wherever which I did for the next 15 months or so until I left to work as the team leader on a biodiversity offset project for the Shell gas liquefaction plant in Qatar. This is when I met Marc Stalmans who I had invited over to explain what biodiversity offsets were, as it was a new concept and he

was one of the few people to have attempted one – in South Africa. We became friends and furthermore when he invited me to become a regional associate of International Conservation Services it provided an opportunity for us to move to South Africa as I needed a sponsor.

Both Susanne and I had started to look at living and working somewhere else. We knew the political status quo couldn't be maintained with the sense of despondency that pervaded all aspects of Egyptian life. We had travelled to South Africa earlier in our relationship, as I wanted her to experience the country and see if she would be interested in making our home in the country. On our last day there we decided to make an offer for a lovely New York loft style apartment in the middle of Cape Town in a lovely old industrial building with high ceilings and huge iron girders. I realized that Susanne liked South Africa and now we had a hook to ensure we came back. In April 2010 we returned to South Africa for my niece's wedding and while there she explored the idea of doing a degree at UCT where they welcomed her application.

In November 2010 we moved down to Cape Town and started our affair with the country, which will continue for the rest of our lives. Susanne completed a 4-year degree in Social Work, earning a first, class medals and UCT's nomination as the best social work student in South Africa in 2015. Not bad eh for a mature student? In the meantime I was involved in a couple of short term projects but was mainly engaged hiking in the Cape's wonderful landscapes, as the chair of the tenants association and reconnecting with my creative urges sculpting and drawing.

Some of my work can be seen on <http://jeagrainger.wix.com/john-grainger>

Susanne and I eventually got married in 2014 but our plans to make South Africa our home were undone when the immigration act changed and social work was no longer regarded as a critical skill for the country, though there is a shortage of over 40,000 social workers just to service the children's act. After we appreciated the practical difficulties and uncertain likelihood of securing a work permit we decided with heavy hearts that we would have to leave and live in Britain if Susanne was to be gainfully employed. Susanne is Swedish but has been away from Sweden long enough to feel more comfortable speaking English. Naturally she was offered a position as a newly qualified social worker with the first council she applied to – South Somerset; hence we now live in a Hamstone house in the village of Bower Hinton in Somerset and Susanne commutes the 7 miles to Yeovil. It is a very different pace to what we had become accustomed in our years abroad, but it has its own charms and advantages, especially as we have taken up cycling and the flat terrain suits us.

I still hope to work on a part-time basis and am presently working on a project to develop management plans for 7 reserves in Dubai and environmental design criteria for a mega-resort on the Red Sea in Saudi Arabia.

So an update. Teresa is currently living in Bali where she paints but is considering moving back to Poland where she has a lovely flat in Krakow and thence to Portugal. Alice, after various dive related jobs and a year in Madagascar, and being the senior editor for ScubaDiver Australasia based in Singapore 'til recently, has just been recruited as the

communications director for the Coral Restoration Foundation with its offices in Key Largo – if they have survived Irma’s impacts. She married Justin an American in August – a very modern elopement which was shared live on FaceBook.

I have many reasons to be grateful to Southampton University – the degree involved me in the nascent environmental movement and provided me with the general tools and qualifications to participate professionally in the field. It was I think in the years that I was a postgraduate that I learned the true value of being at university and to become intellectually curious. I attended lecture and events in different faculties, started to appreciate film as an artistic medium and different music genres and attended conversational French classes. I joined evening pottery classes with the wonderful Phyll Bithell, where I learned I had not enough patience or skill to master throwing but reconnected to clay sculpting; I also attended evening art appreciation and life drawing classes with an artist in residence whose name I forget.

So thank you Southampton University – you launched me. A major regret has been, that aside from Peter and Vicky Winfield fellow students at Southampton, I have lost contact with all my fellow survivors from our course and others with whom I shared possibly the three most formative years of my life. Thanks to Mike’s blog efforts this regret could now be rectified.

### **Reference**

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