



RISKS, SOCIAL NORMS AND WILD BOARS
IN THE GRUNEWALD
ALEX KACELNIK

Alex Kacelnik investigates decision-making by “human and non-human animals” in Oxford, where he chairs the Behavioural Ecology Research Group. His approach combines evolutionary biology, experimental psychology and economics. Alex was born in Buenos Aires in 1946 and studied biological sciences at Buenos Aires University before moving to Oxford in 1974. In addition to Oxford, he spent time at Groningen, Cambridge, and Leiden. His recent publications address risk attitude, tool use, smiling and trust, the relation between evolutionary biology and psychoanalysis, the sense of time and several other areas of behavioural research. In addition to his research, Alex is co-founder of Oxford Risk Research and Analysis, Ltd., a company dedicated to investigating decision-making in industrial contexts. His web page is <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~kgroup/>. During the academic year 2002/03, he can be found at Wiko, Oxford, or in the air between both, and after July 2003 at: Department of Zoology, Oxford OX1 3PS, Great Britain.

I write these lines more as a mid-term reflection than a balance sheet, as, unusually, I have the luck of reaching the end of my first year at Wiko with the prospect of starting a second one. This forthcoming year fills me with curiosity. The process of social and intellectual integration between Fellows that I experienced and observed as the months and the Tuesday colloquia ticked away seemed to me completely unique, perhaps in the same form as memories from school times tell us that our class mates were indeed a uniquely interesting set of people.

Only the teacher’s experience of seeing one cohort after another of undergraduates arrive, mature and then leave, can subvert that illusion: our school class, after all, was just

another unique school class ... so, perhaps, the cohort of Fellows arriving at the time I write this will be just as special but at the same time entirely different. Perhaps different individuals will settle into roles that are vaguely recognizable from year to year. Perhaps there will be someone with the fine and subtle self-referential humour of Allan Young, someone with the social conviction of Beshara Doumani, someone with the inquisitive persistence of Ernst Fehr, someone with the fantastic interdisciplinary curiosity of John Breuille, someone ... you get my drift. Because, of course, I am already missing all of them.

The personal and professional characteristics of each of the Fellows are most evident at the Tuesday colloquia, without any doubt the core of life at Wiko. I believe the first colloquium I attended was given by Raghavendra Gadagkar. Implausibly, he started by saying he was not intending to water down the content of his presentation to make allowances for the multidisciplinary of the audience. He promised to explain the intricacies of social life in a wasp colony to an audience of translators of German poets into Rumanian, of historians who believe that the “m” word (modernity for the uninitiated) should be banned or at least forgotten, of economists interested in the dynamics of the welfare state, of art critics who ask how could it be that ideas can be represented on surfaces, of judges analysing the constitutional aspects of European integration and a variety of other equally unlikely bedfellows, and he would do it without concessions to their lack of previous contact with biology. He would speak, he said, at the level at which he discusses the problems with his own colleagues. And, alas, he did. In an astonishing tour the force that held the audience’s eyes glued to the screen, he took us from the most elementary aspects of insect sociality to the cutting edge problems he and his colleagues are investigating right now. He showed that, amazingly, it can be done. I would like to believe we all tried hard to emulate him through the year. Some times it worked, some didn’t, but this is not surprising. The point is that this Babel tower at the edge between Berlin and the Grunewald encourages by its very existence a sophisticated and demanding level of intellectual sharing, and this alone would be sufficient to enrich anybody’s life.

At work level, there was a fortunate coincidence of sorts. The groups moderated by Ernst Fehr on Social Norms and by me on The Sciences of Risk turned out to have even more in common than we had anticipated. The “normies” and the “riskies” got together at informal workshops and sometimes at the beer garden at the edge of the forest. We talked and argued, we challenged and supported, we laughed together and – occasionally – annoyed each other, but we learnt an enormous amount in the process. I do not believe Ernst and I finally did reach agreement about how evolutionary theory and empirical be-

havioural research should and do interact, but, honestly, who cares about agreement when discrepancy can be so stimulating. Outside Wiko, a crucial referent for me was Gerd Gigerenzer. As with Ernst, we argued relentlessly, and again I don't think we reached agreement, this time about the interplay between optimality assumptions and bounded rationality, but again, I think we both enjoyed and felt richer for these disagreements.

I guess I haven't seen much of Berlin, really. Yes, I did go to the museums, and I did see the architecture and I did have brunch at Einstein's, but, truly, most of my non-research time was dominated by watching beavers and migratory cranes at Linum, by chasing singing nightingales and, specially, by the forest. During winter I brought some of the forest to the balcony of Villa Jaffé, where nuthatches, long tailed and crested tits, hawfinches, jays, robins and the occasional woodpecker argued with the red squirrels for possession of the multiple feeders I provided. When spring arrived, I left the balcony to a pair of nesting blue tits and visited the rest of them at their home, spending evenings cycling or walking through the muddy paths, doing my thinking as I saw and heard singing nightingales, furtive foxes and, best of all, clumsy wild boars. I had hardly imagined that life in Berlin would mean being five bicycle minutes away from families of wild boars prowling untidily for roots, and I am sure that some of my fellow Fellows prefer to remain ignorant of this proximity, but, if there is something I can recommend to future Fellows as the perfect complement to the Tuesday colloquia, it is the forest experience. Just do it.

The highlight of the year from a work point of view was our workshop on the Sciences of Risk. Several distinguished outsiders joined us for two days of intense discussion on risk at all levels (among them, Danny Kahneman, who went on to earn the Nobel prize later on the year). I asked the speakers something unusual: "while we all know how you defend your theories – we are all quite experienced with each other's work – nobody knows the weaknesses of your theories better than you", hence, I went on "please try to focus your talk on what is weak in your own pet proposals. Beyond the fact that you probably consider your theory the best on the shelf, which empirical facts are nagging you because they refuse to oblige?" Fortunately, at least some of the speakers took the invitation, and the result was a fascinating and productive experience. You will hear more about this.

I have referred to the Fellows and their contributions, but, of course, Wiko is much more than that. The staff make the place what it is. I shall avoid the temptation of naming them individually, but I am – as I know my fellow Fellows are – profoundly grateful to all of them.

I look forward to a second round.