



OF BARNACLES AND CLIFFS
STEPHEN SIMPSON

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When certain species of shark become encrusted with barnacles to the point where their streamlining becomes seriously impaired, they swim upriver into freshwater and wait for the barnacles, which are unable to cope with the osmotic shock, to drop off. Thus scoured, the sharks return to the ocean. I sit and write this report back at my desk in Oxford – back in the midst of the sea of meetings and responsibilities from which I had been largely spared for the past year. I am frantically failing to prevent some of the barnacles that had

dropped off during the year from reattaching themselves, along with some even bigger, more ugly ones.

The two most common responses I got when telling colleagues that I was to spend a year at Wiko as part of a two-man team with David Raubenheimer were: “But you will have no laboratory facilities”, and “Why spend a year in Berlin with David when you are already in the same department and close collaborators anyway?” Both are valid comments and warrant some discussion.

A year physically away from the laboratory, aside from a short trip back to run an experiment, has turned out not to have been a problem. This is thanks to three things. In large part it is due to Wiko having allowed us to appoint our senior post-doctoral scientist, Spencer Behmer, to take on the role of day-to-day manager of the lab, a responsibility that he assumed with great skill and effectiveness. Second, we were able to bring some of the graduate students and post-doctoral research associates across for short visits to discuss their experiments and data. Finally, there was e-mail – that double-edged sword. In fact, being away from Oxford has allowed us to write research papers and grant applications that otherwise would certainly not all have fitted into the interstices of our busy lives. As a consequence, two successful grant applications mean that the laboratory is secure for the coming three years, eight primary research papers are in press or were published during the year, three others are under review, and an edited volume has gone to press.

Nevertheless, it is possible to squeeze the writing of grants and papers and the editing of books into normal life, which means that, in this sense, the year at Wiko was facilitatory rather than necessary. But writing books is an entirely different matter – or at least it is for me. That requires three ingredients: the time to read widely, the time to think, and the company of stimulating colleagues. Wiko provided all three, as well as easy access to the literature we needed, thanks to the wonderful library staff. And here I return to the query about why spend a year with David in Berlin when we both come from the same place. The short answer is that being within the same institution and intersecting for an hour or so each week is not the same as spending each and every day for a year in a shared office. This could have been catastrophic, of course: we might have ended the year no longer speaking, let alone writing together. We came with the advantage of a long-standing and productive collaboration, like minds, a craving for caffeine and beer, and similar taste in music. We left Wiko having spent a superbly stimulating and fun year, in which we applied to humans concepts in nutritional biology that have derived from our work over the past 16 years on insects (see the report of our Abendkolloquium in this volume) and also

broke the back of a book for Princeton University Press, titled “Integrative Behavior: from Neurons to Societies”.

Both projects required coming to grips with vast and diverse literatures. Both are also the type of endeavour that involves flying in the face of vested ideas. Ragh Gadagkar argued in his entry in the last yearbook that Wiko’s unique strength is that it provides the ideal environment in which ambitious, renegade projects can be conceived and nurtured – where new mountains can be constructed. It struck me that this description applied to our two projects. It remains to be seen whether we end up, in Ragh’s words, throwing ourselves off our own cliffs, but whatever happens, we are pleased by the view.

David and I worked closely together, but we could not have had anything like the year we had without the other biologists. Villa Jaffé was also home to Georg Striedter, Alex Kacelnik, Miguel Rodríguez-Gironés and Stefano Nolfi, while Ragh Gadagkar, Barbara Finlay, Eörs Szathmáry, Tecumseh Fitch and Luis Puelles were just down Wallotstraße, and Rüdiger Wehner flew in regularly. It would be hard to collect together a more exciting, widely read, conceptually adventurous bunch, and it was a real privilege to spend a year with them and to enjoy their ideas and friendship.

And we biologists were but a group within the Fellowship. Much has been written in past yearbooks comparing the different styles, preoccupations and methods of the scientists and our colleagues in the humanities; a distinction that was illustrated during the weekly colloquia in the contrast between visually striking, data-rich (ridden) Powerpoint presentations and meticulously worded, read texts. Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus observed one Thursday evening over dinner that science communication is the new theatre, and scientists the new performers, and he may well be right. Techniques of presentation aside, the biggest challenge during the colloquia for all of us was to judge how long a bridge of preliminary background to build before attempting to throw new, specialist contributions across the remaining gulf between the speaker and the individual members of the audience. Then, during the discussion afterwards, the problem was how to distinguish criticism of the speaker’s own contributions from that of the bridge.

The colloquium discussions were also a fascinating part of the sociological experiment that Wiko represents. At the beginning of a Wiko year, we all arrive more or less unknown to the other Fellows – stripped of our context and reputations. This is a profoundly uncomfortable condition for most academics. The quality of question asked at colloquia soon becomes a currency for establishing a reputation, and the colloquium itself becomes inordinately important. Speaking for myself – and I guess I’m not alone – I have never felt so

nervous about any other talk I've given in my career. It was also interesting from a sociological perspective to follow the ontogeny of the year. The first few months were typically spent trying to scrape off barnacles, then, mindful that a year is finite, Fellows worked single-mindedly on their projects. It was nearing the end of the year, when books were finished or it was clear that they wouldn't be, reputations had been established, and character traits recognised, that many of the most stimulating lunchtime discussions occurred – leading us to feel that only then were we ready to start the year.

The other essential ingredient to a successful year is a happy domestic life, and in that regard my year was a resounding success. We had a wonderful time. This year saw the largest population of children ever at Wiko, and an exceedingly talented and interesting set of Fellows' partners. A strong community developed among families living at Villa Walther. Our children went to school and played together, we shared our experiences of Berlin, socialised, and made what promise to be life-long friendships. The Thursday dinners, where spouses and children were made welcome, were particularly important in helping this process along and in integrating Fellows with and without families. Academic matters aside, this year's Fellows, their partners and families were quite simply a lovely set of people.