



SALAD DAYS
KEVIN J. GASTON

Kevin J. Gaston is Professor of Biodiversity and Conservation at the University of Exeter, UK. He was educated at the Universities of Sheffield and of York. He then spent five years as a Research Fellow at the Natural History Museum in London, before taking up a Royal Society University Research Fellowship first at Imperial College London and then at the University of Sheffield. He became Professor of Biodiversity and Conservation at the University of Sheffield in 2002, moving to the University of Exeter in 2011 as Founding Director of the Environment and Sustainability Institute, a position he stood down from in 2017. Kevin's research has addressed a broad range of basic, strategic and applied issues in ecology. He has authored over 550 scientific publications and eight monographs, including *Rarity* (1994), *Physiological Diversity and its Ecological Implications* (with J. I. Spicer, 1999), *Pattern and Process in Macroecology* (with T. M. Blackburn, 2000) and *The Structure and Dynamics of Geographic Ranges* (2003). Kevin is an ISI Highly Cited Researcher, was elected to Academia Europaea (2011) and has been awarded the British Ecological Society Marsh Award in Ecology (2013) and the International Ecology Institute Excellence in Ecology Prize in Terrestrial Ecology (2017). – Address: Environment and Sustainability Institute, University of Exeter, Penryn, Cornwall TR10 9FE, United Kingdom. E-mail: k.j.gaston@exeter.ac.uk.

I spent a few weeks at the Wissenschaftskolleg in 1994, as a guest of the then Rector, Wolf Lepenies, in order to participate in a working group on conservation planning that was run that year by some colleagues. For me as a young research fellow, it was an eye-opening exposure to the breadth of academic endeavour and to what study leave could be like,

and a highly productive period. It still carries memories of long lunches with fascinating people, a library that seemed able to get whatever obscure material I needed, and an all-pervading sense of calm and space to think. It was an experience that I was keen to revisit over a more extended time as a full year-long Fellow of the Wiko. It just took another 23 years for the opportunity to arise.

My previous visit to the Wiko was during my “salad days” as Shakespeare meant them, when I was young and inexperienced and, in short, somewhat “green”. This time around, these were my salad days as the phrase is otherwise used, to refer to a time of more material affluence (at least as compared with the relative poverty of a young research fellow) and more mature years. Ironically, in the environmental sense I was also actually much greener than previously. This time these were also quite literally my salad days, in that I have never eaten quite as much salad!

I had planned what I would do at the Wiko with some care. What early on caught me unawares was that one consequence of being able to escape the normal day-to-day pressures and demands of academic life was that I was able to gain some more distance and reflect on the choices I make as to what research to do and what not to do. I found myself with more time to consider not just what was the next logical question to tackle, but whether the veins of research that I have followed in recent years are actually the most interesting and useful ones, whether there are other veins that would be better choices and whether there are better ways of characterizing the research that I do. This led eventually to me distilling out my research into the three distinct, but linked, areas of night-time ecology, common ecology and personalised ecology.

The project that I had originally pitched to the Wiko as part of my case to be offered a Fellowship was focused on night-time ecology. In particular, I wanted to develop a much improved understanding of the ecology of the night-time relative to that of the daytime, of the interplay between the two and of how artificial lighting (from streetlights and other sources) changes things. The nighttime was clearly a topic on which a number of the other Fellows had views from their own disciplinary perspectives, which made for discussions on many related topics that I had not anticipated. I tried early on to quash the apparently prevalent notion that if I was interested in the night-time, then I personally must be largely nocturnal and spend my nights roaming Berlin and its environs. I am not sure that all were entirely persuaded.

When I first visited the Wiko in the 1990s, I had just completed a book on why so many species are rare and what the consequences of this might be. Now I find myself

much more interested in why so few species become common and what that means for the world around us. This reflects in part recognition that we are living in a period when many previously common species are in drastic decline. The Wiko gave me an opportunity to develop, and write much of, a new book on commonness.

For many years I have spent my days surrounded foremost by people who not only care passionately about the state of the natural environment, but also know a lot about the species around them and actively seek any opportunity to spend time observing them. I tend to take it as a given that people notice the life that they are amongst and attribute greater value to those places where it exists than those where it does not. It thus came as something of a shock to be amidst a group of people who, by and large, did not pay much attention to these things. This was graphically demonstrated one lunchtime when a female sparrowhawk swooped low over the heads of the Fellows as they lunched on the terrace, dived into a bush and emerged clutching a still squawking house sparrow. I, and the ecologist sitting with me, seemed to be the only ones who noticed.

Of course, there are lots of things that other Fellows pay heed to and that I am completely oblivious to. And I am sure that some were equally bemused by my ignorance and by having an individual in their midst who seemed rudely to have as much an eye on what the wildlife was doing outside as paying attention to what they were saying. But we ended up having great exchanges about that and other wildlife, discussing what each of us did and did not see and debating what is and is not “nature” (the diversity of answers to which continues to astound me). I will long treasure Kris’s discoveries of the variety of trees in the Grunewald. And all of this helped fuel what has become an attempt on my part to define a new field of ecology. What I call “personalised ecology” seeks to determine what wildlife it is that people experience in their daily lives, what influences this has (including on their health and wellbeing) and what the consequences are (do more nature experiences make one care more about its future?).

Towards the end of our time at the Wiko, I found myself asking some other Fellows what advice they would give to someone who was considering applying for or taking up such a Fellowship. The responses varied widely, inevitably reflecting to some degree how well their own year had played out in terms of work, friends and family, both in Berlin and, of course, back home. But I think many of us shared the values of being rather free simply to pursue our own daily path, in the midst of others who were pursuing theirs. And, of course, being supported in so doing by the extraordinarily kind and generous Wiko staff.

And what memories will I carry most strongly with me this time? Sitting in the morning sunshine of the club room, editing a manuscript whilst listening to Andreas playing Bach. Being introduced to Syrian breakfast by Yassin, and watching flocks of cranes with Marion and Matthias. Learning from Asfa how the diaries of early travellers can provide vital information on the rainfall cycles of Ethiopia. Talking termites with Stan, and lamp-posts with Vittorio. And so many more.

Hopefully I can return with greater frequency than to date, otherwise I am not due back again until 2041!