BEAR ENVIRONMENT

The Magazine of the Society of Environmental Authors and Journalists

https://environmentalwriters.org

Issue Number 3 (Summer 2024)

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Summer Edition of our magazine, its good to see regular sunshine here in the UK, even though it's not as consistent as in normal years. But with world-wide extremes of weather, we don't suffer too badly in the UK at this time. Many thanks to the Spring Edition magazine contributors, your support is always appreciated. Our young supporter Wolf Sayers' piece was delightful.

This summer we would like to introduce you to Dr Bill Streever and his wife Lisanne Aerts. Both are biologists and authors of many interesting books based on Marine Life. They gave up normal conventional lives to live aboard the *Rocinante* and go to sea, leading exciting but fairly dangerous lives. Like other members Melissa Hobson and Kara Majerus, they spend much of their time diving and observing our wonderful sea life. It's good to see that we have a number of sea life experts. Kara set up and runs a charity to protect coastal waters and sea life in Indonesia.

The Life Afloat: An Introduction to the Column

by

Bill Streever, with photographs by Lisanne Aerts

Nine years ago, my wife and I traded our mainstream careers for the life afloat. Admittedly, it is possible that few would think of our work histories as especially mainstream. As seasoned biologists, we had worked in Australia, Russia, Colombia, various parts of the Caribbean, the Netherlands, Florida, Louisiana, and the Alaskan Arctic, on corals and sponges, cave crayfish, salt marshes and mangroves, fish, birds, habitat restoration, seals, and whales. We were, as they say in the trade, well published and well respected. But we were growing uncomfortably familiar with computer screens and conference rooms. The rare mud on our boots came from checking on field teams that we managed from afar.

Hoping to spend our lives closer to nature, we traded up. We walked away from the conventional workforce and bought an old but solid boat, a cruising ketch built in 1965. We named her *Rocinante*, after the horse of Don Quixote, and set off from Galveston Bay in Texas for Guatemala, learning to sail along the way.

Our slow voyage to no place in particular eventually took us through the Panama Canal. From there we sailed more than 2,000 miles up the west coast of the Americas to Mexico's Gulf of California, the magical place that many—in keeping with John Steinbeck—call the Sea of Cortez, despite the misery that the conquistador delivered everywhere he went.

The Rocinante

Dr Bill Streever

Did we find what we hoped to find? This morning we paddled our kayaks to an uninhabited shore, watching mobula and cownose rays through clear water. Then we walked for four hours through the desert, learning and relearning a few plant species and talking about the bat pollinators of towering cardón cactus. We tried to piece together the geology of a landscape mostly formed from uplifted and twisted layers of tuff—that is, volcanic ash. We watched a pair of Red-tailed Hawks, a Gila Woodpecker, and a Loggerhead Shrike. Seeking shade under the branches of a mesquite, we startled a foot-long lizard; it dropped from a high branch to the desert floor before scurrying away.

And this was not an especially busy morning. So yes, we found what we hoped to find.

We paddled home through growing waves. *Rocinante* was hobby-horsing to such an extent that an unattended mug of tea set on the galley table would crash to the cabin sole within seconds. Our anchorage, if not untenable, had become less than comfortable. We consulted weather forecasts and nautical charts, weighed anchor, and sailed five miles north. Our new anchorage almost certainly started life as a caldera, formed maybe 20 million years ago when the Farrallon Plate slid under the North American Plate—tectonics in action, the end result of which was to offer the protection of towering cliffs on three sides. The sea's motion would not torment us here.

But even with the unexpected chore of moving, our day had not become unusually busy. Part of living closer to nature means regularly dealing with her uncertainties and discomforts. At times it means sleepless nights, anxieties, and even something akin to terror—something, for example, like booming thunder, sideways pelting rain, and wind gusts taking control of the boat.

So with this life we found both what we hoped to find and what was not hoped for but was certainly foreseeable. Living closer to nature came with rewards, but also with inconveniences and a level of risk.

On top of all this, our particular approach to living closer to nature means, unescapably, boat maintenance. Winches have to be disassembled, greased, and put back together. Worn rigging must be replaced. Damaged fiberglass screams out for repair. Diesel engines and solar panels seldom fix themselves. Teak, left alone, fades, dries, and cracks. All of this would again go into the category of expected but never hoped for.

But this life has brought us in touch with something more, something surprising. This life has brought us hope for the future of the environment.

How so?

Because everywhere we go, everywhere we sail to, we meet people working to fix previous wrongs. In Mazatlan not long ago, we met a fishermen in his seventies who, recognizing that his fishing grounds had been decimated, has turned toward small-scale aquaculture, self-funded and in an urbanized estuary. Not long before that by chance we met a group of Mexican university students monitoring Blue-footed Booby nest success, supporting a database established before they were born to track the status of a delightful bird. Earlier in the year we talked with a Mexican veterinarian who walked away from a job looking after pets to found an organization that saves sea lions from gillnets and protects nesting sea turtles.

Why does that bring us hope? Of course we know that people all over the world are working to protect and restore the environment. We ourselves had worked and continue to work as environmentalists. But this is Mexico. Life here, for ordinary citizens, offers regular encounters with poverty, potholed or nonexistent roads, water shortages, power outages, a marginal healthcare system, disappearances, cartel violence, and government corruption. But despite these realities, some people make nature a priority.

Seeing this and recognizing its importance led to my latest book, *A Sea Full of Turtles: The Search for Optimism in an Epoch of Extinction*. And now, at the request of the Society of Environmental Authors and Journalists and BEAR ENVIRONMENT magazine, it has led to this series about the life afloat, about what two biologists are seeing in the Gulf of California and along the Pacific coast of Mexico.

In the next issue of BEAR ENVIRONMENT, look for the story of the world's youngest sea, the Gulf of California: how it formed and what it is today.

Bill Streever, a biologist, is the award winning and bestselling nature writer behind *A Sea Full of Turtles*, *In Oceans Deep*, *Cold*, and other books. With his wife, marine biologist and photographer Lisanne Aerts, he lives aboard the cruising sailboat *Rocinante*, currently in the Gulf of California. When they are not busy fixing the boat, they spend their time sailing, diving, hiking, rowing a dinghy, paddling a kayak, seeing the world through the twin lenses of science and history, and, of course, writing and taking pictures. One hundred percent of their proceeds from publications support conservation projects. Find more at www.billstreever.com.

Photo captions

1. *(Above)* A painting of Rocinante by the world-renowned maritime artist, Steven Dews.
2. A pair of cownose rays.
3. Students monitoring Blue-footed Booby nests.
4. A sea turtle hatchling making its way to sea from a protected nest.

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PALAEONTOLOGY and the ENVIRONMENT

By Robert Tansey

Palaeontology is a subject that not everyone is aware of, it's a huge range of subject matter that is of great interest to science. Why should we members of the Society of Environmental Authors and Journalists be interested as well? Because it is fundamental to our understanding of the earth, its creation, and all life that survives upon it. The evolution of mankind is the very basis of our existence, why we are here. Before we were created the earth had to be there, and it has gone for thousands and millions of years, through various evolutionary stages to get where it is now. The earth and its climate have never been stable, all is subject to evolutionary change, but with time the earth had become fairly stable. What man has done is to destabilise our fairly stable earth. In just a few years man has created situations which have a major impact upon our lives. But that is a fact, but we need to understand the past to know why things now rapidly changing. To understand the past, will enable us to prepare for the future.

Palaeontology is the study of the earth and its geological past. It encompasses so much more than the earth's crust as we find it. It's what it contains, its extinct life forms. All things that once lived on the earth, plants and animals, micro-organisms. All can be studied. Palaeontology is the concerned mainly with this area of study. It covers other roles such as palaeobiology, palaeobotany, and micropalaeontology.

Modern palaeontology focuses on how physical and chemical climatic and geographical changes have impacted the evolution of life and how organisms have either disappeared or adapted to these conditions. Because the study of ancient life is so broad, palaeontology is divided into many subdisciplines based on the questions that scientists pose, and the research they undertake.

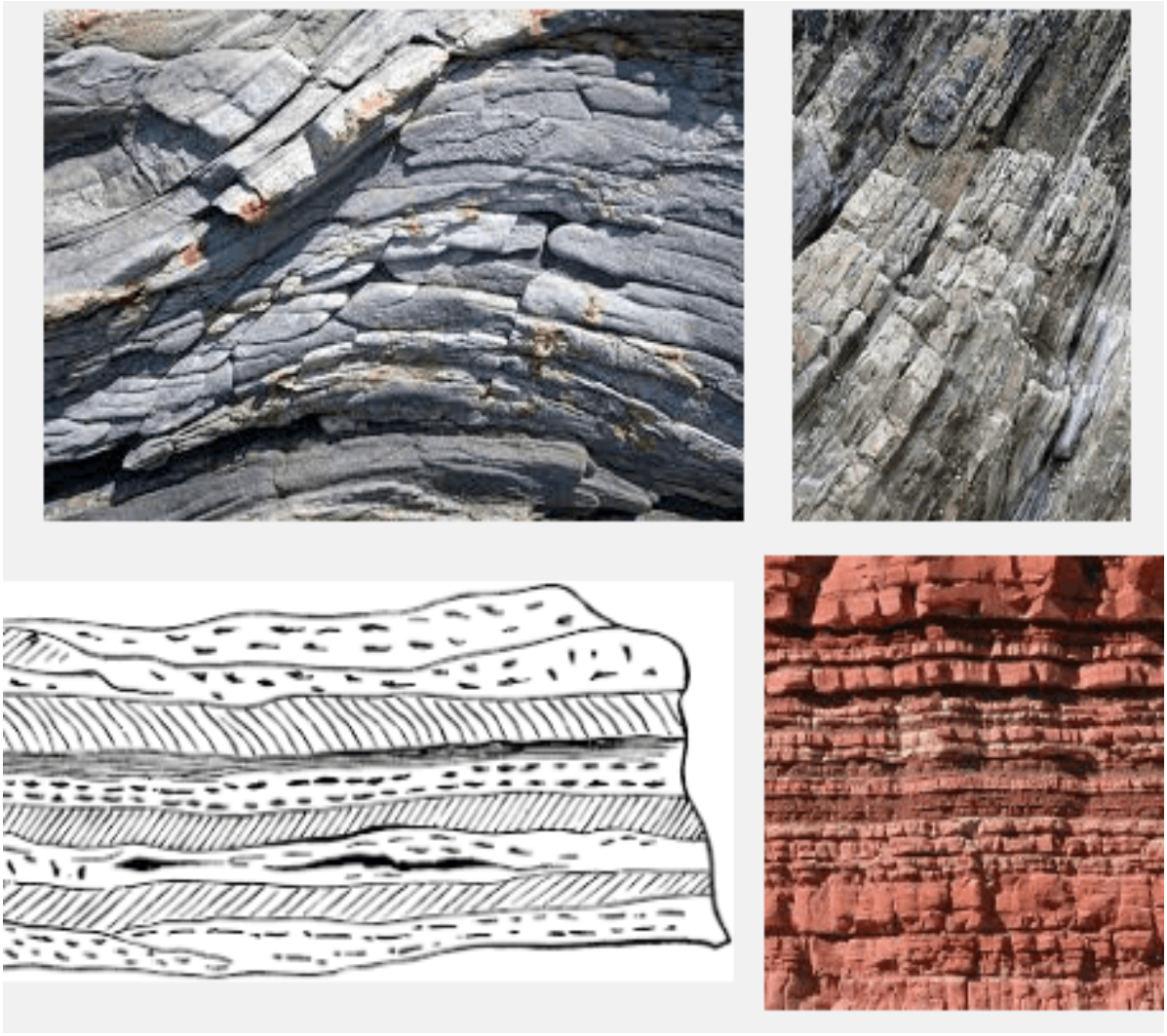
Studying palaeontology is both essential and interesting for many of us. Children are attracted to the existence of dinosaurs, the fossil remains of which can be seen in most major museums.

Time: The Geological Clock

James Hutton proposed the principle of classifying rocks in layers, as each layer referred to a specific period of time. It's normal now to think of the earth's crust being made up in layers, the oldest layers at the bottom or deepest level, and more recent layers to the top or near to the surface of the earth. A peek at a cliff or rock face at the seaside will show clearly what Hutton correctly thought. James Hutton therefore created what is known as the Geological Time Scale. Due to volcanic action, some rock formations are not horizontal but slanted or offset. So what sometimes appear to be the oldest rock formations are not. Yet the clock ticks on, similar changes take place today, the past is the present, and the present is the past.

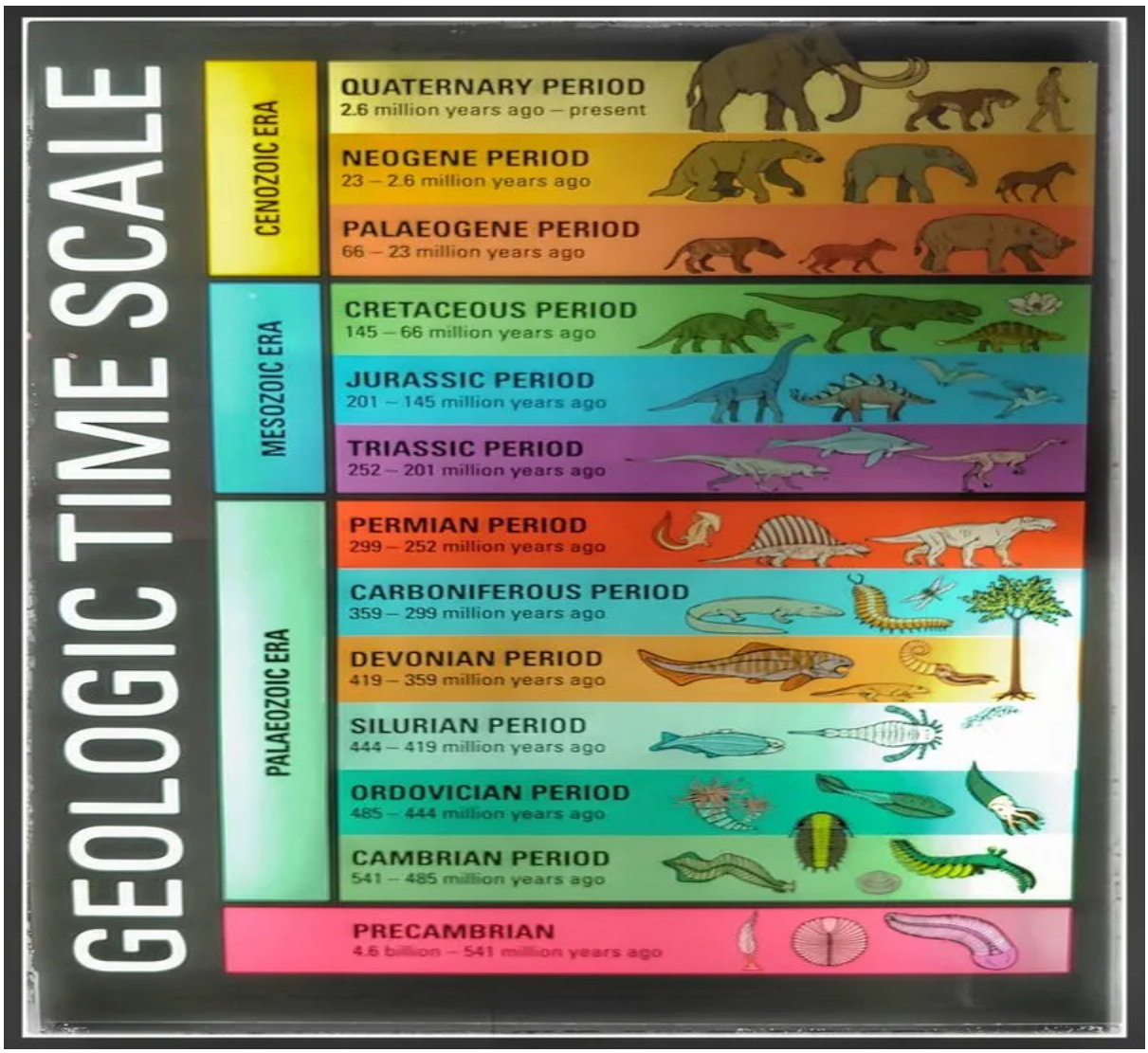
'The Scottish geologist James Hutton (1726-1797), in his Theory of the Earth (1785), had studied the stratification of rocks (their arrangement in superimposed layers or strata), the establishing principles which were to be the basis of archaeological excavation,. Hutton

showed that the stratification of rocks was due to processes which were still going on in the seas, rivers, and lakes.'



Stratification as we understand it now is a normal process that takes millions of years to be created. It's also the way that archaeologists date the artifacts and buildings and bones they find in the upper soft layers of earth, which lie well above the geological rock formations that lie below them.

Palaeontology therefore is the preserve of palaeontologists who study the fossilized finds preserved in these ancient rocks, from insects to dinosaurs, from microbes to giant trees. Archaeology is the preserve of those who study humankind, his dwellings, and his history told by what he has left behind.



A basic Geological Period Clock conceived by James Hutton.

Fossils of many dead animals and life organisms are to be found in certain rock formations. Each layer of the rock face denotes a particular period of time in our past. Each layer may or may not reveal fossil remains. Much depends upon the composition of the rock layer itself some are well suited to preserving fossil remains others are not. Either way the information we can obtain from these remains in their fossilized form, can help us understand the conditions under which these animals or insects lived. Plant life was just as important to these species as they are now. There is no doubt that many animals and creatures roamed the earth in very difficult climatic conditions. The conditions under which we survive today may rapidly change. Our living environment could one day return to a predefined period of time in the past. A period before man emerged as a dominant being, to change the climate rapidly as man is now doing.

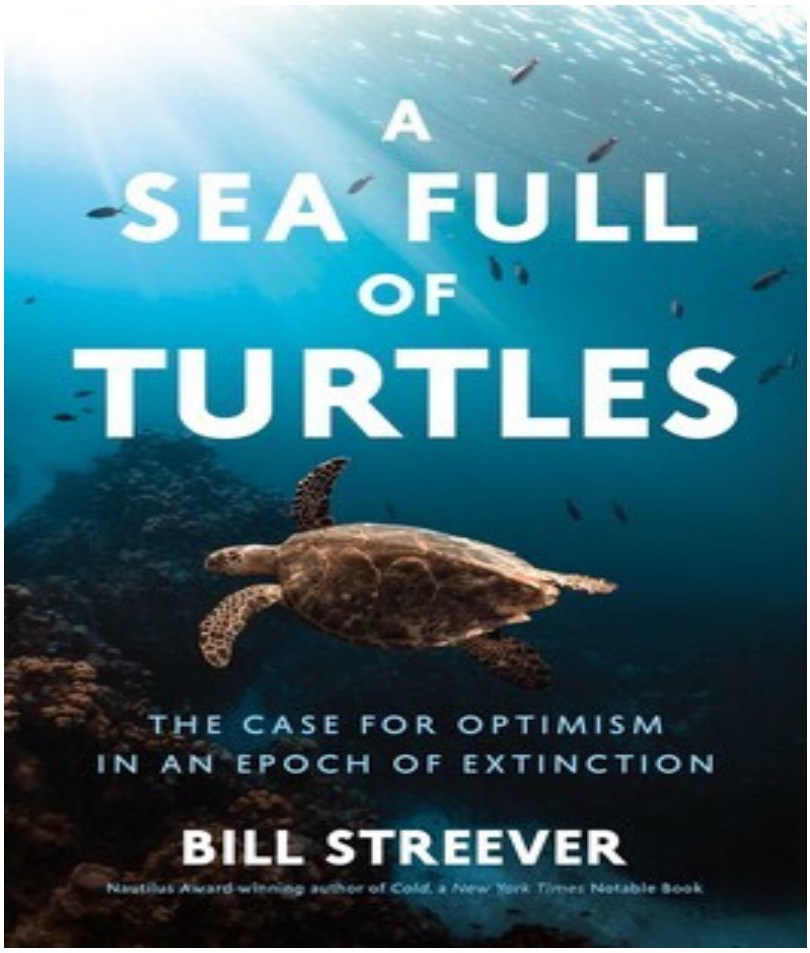
The very best we can hope for is that we can adjust our living to accept the world as it is, to force as little change as possible. The more we study the past in our search of the riches of palaeontology, the more we can accept our condition.

Could it be that scientists might recreate past eras? The answer is they could with the right resources. The risks of such endeavours are clear to see in the fictional film ‘Jurassic

Park'. But what of the Woolly Mammoth? Scientists are actually working on this for good or bad. Fossils of mammoths are not found in our older rocks they are found in much more recent ice deposits, as frozen in time life forms. They are still classified as fossils but have all the organic matter still intact. They lived about 10.000 years ago at the time of the last ice age. They lived alongside our ancient ancestors, and it could be that our ancestors wiped them out.

BOOK OF THE SUMMER

and Others Written by Members of the Society



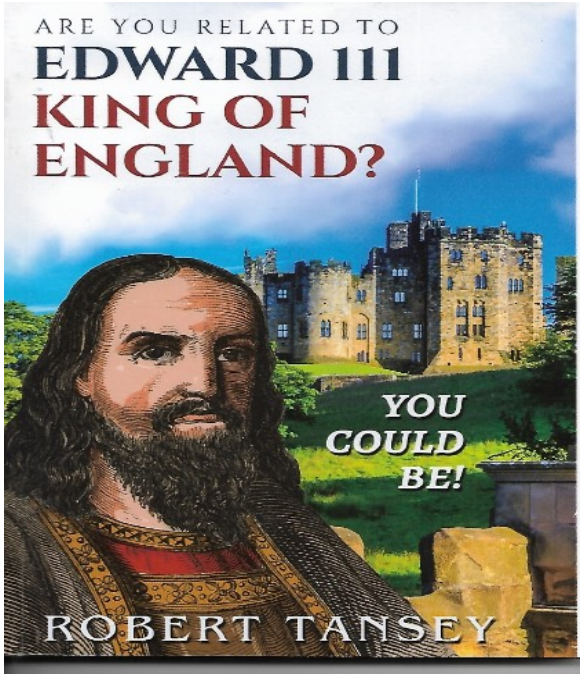
This book by one of our Founder Members is one of the few offering us a glimpse of hope in an uncertain future. Bill and his wife Lisanne have travelled the world in their sailing sloop *ROCINANTE* seeking out sea life in all its forms. As biologists they were very interested in the decline of the worlds turtle populations. They have spent a great deal of time and effort searching for various species of turtle, and have met many people involved protecting them and their habitats. Bill tells of successes and failures, but overriding all is his optimism for the future. He sees turtles surviving for many more years: the eating of turtle meat was for a long period of time popular, but he tells us is no longer the case.

Habitats overrun by tourists are a newish threat, but as long as dedicated volunteers can manage these situations, there will always be hope. As biologists, Bill and Lisanne could have bored us with facts and figures, but they have not. Bill tells the story as a human being, with emotion and feelings we can all appreciate.

Lisanne Aerts

On Sale for £16.49 at Amazon: https://amazon.co.uk/books and other Major Book Outlets.

Books by Other Members

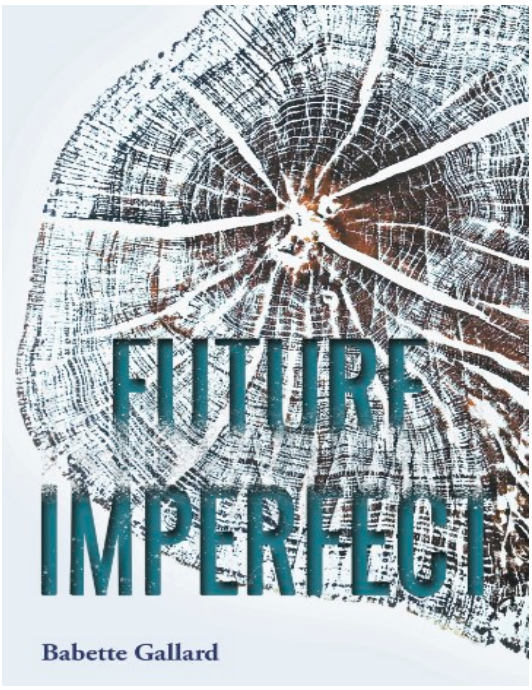


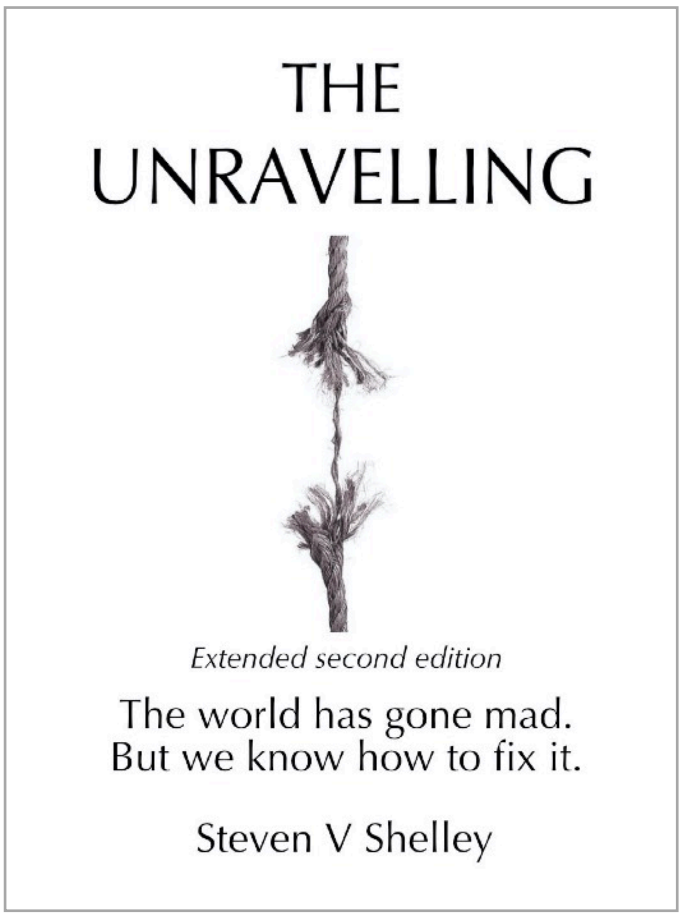
A book about family history, and how all of us link together in the human chain of life. This book takes us on a genealogical journey back to the 1300s when our King of England was Edward Plantagenet, who was the authors 18th Great Grandfather. All of us who are natives of this land are related one way or the other. Robert found that by following genealogical links through his great grandmother, it led him back to clergymen, barons, and knights of the realm, to Sir George de Neville 1407-1469 brother of Cecily de Neville mother of Edward IV, father of the twins in the Tower, and Richard II who was suspected of murdering them. Thence back to John of Gaunt and his father Edward III.

Followers of the Who Do You Think You Are television series will have followed a similar trail with Danny Dyer of Eastenders Fame.

This book is for sale at £7 from the on-line bookshop: The Great British Bookshop: https://thegreatbritishbookshop.co.uk

Future Imperfect is a new reading experience, by our member Babette Gallard. Get it from the World of Books: https://www.wob.com





Steve's latest book attempts to diagnose what's going wrong with the world, and having described the symptoms of what looks like a disease, goes on to suggest some remedies.

He observes that we are approaching a tipping point which could trigger an irreversible collapse of the global ecosystem – of which we all form a part – yet virtually no-one seems to be taking serious action to slow, let alone stop, our lemming-like flight towards the edge of the cliff.

By exploring and exposing these issues, the hope is that readers' confusion and anxiety may become easier to handle.

The book contains some deep insights into the nature of reality and imagination and suggests what we can all do to create a better world for ourselves, our families and our communities.

Available from Amazon: https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0D154PBRD

How You Can Support Your Pollinators

By Alethea Kehas

Three-quarters of the plants we use for food worldwide depend upon pollination, yet climate change and commercial agricultural practices are putting a heavy strain on our pollinators. What can you do as a consumer to ensure that pollinators not only survive, but thrive in years to come?

Perhaps the first and simplest step you can take is to eliminate the use of chemicals in your yard and gardens. This will not only benefit the wellbeing of the bees, butterflies, bats, and pollinating animals in your local area, but your health as well. Extending this practice to the foods you consume will help ensure the diversity and abundance of species on a more global scale.

Whether you live in an urban or rural environment, there are additional steps you can take to increase the diversity and fecundity of pollinators around you, such as:

- Consider planting a pollinator garden in your yard or on your rooftop or patio using a range of native and non-invasive species to support diversity and ensure a continuous blooming time.
- Donate your time or money to organizations that support pollinator health, such as pollinator.org

- Start a pollinator garden in our local community or school, or donate your time to an existing one.
- Encourage your family, friends, neighbors, and elected officials to support pollinator health locally and globally.
- Be gentle and mindful with the environment when you are recreating in nature.
- Educate yourself on what pollinators are important to your area and how you can help to preserve local species diversity.
- Ensure that the land you reside upon provides ample food, water, and shelter for your local pollinating insects and animals. For example, Environment America offers some easy ways to create "bee hotels" in your yard.
- Consider turning your lawn into a pollinator garden.
- And, take daily steps to combat climate change and the preservation of vital resources such as water. The Climate Change Council suggests the following five ways you can help "tackle climate change:"
    1. Walk, bike, or take public transport
    2. Reduce your consumption of red meat
    3. Invest your money in institutions that support green energy
    4. Cut down on your food waste
    5. Be energy conscious

African honeybees aka African killer bees

African honeybees, and their relatives Africanised honeybees, have gained the nickname "killer bees" due to their aggressive behaviour. A BBC article entitled *Flying threat: Why are killer bees so dangerous?* (by Jon Kelly) stated the following:

"They surround you in their multitudes – hundreds, maybe thousands of them, swooping and stinging and injecting venom into your flesh.

They might go for your eyes. Or fill up your mouth, nostrils and ears. You will have to run hundreds of yards to escape, if you can see where you are going.

And the air fills with the pheromone that tells the bees to protect their colony. Apparently, it smells like bananas."

This article referred to Africanised honeybees which came about as a result of human intervention resulting in the mating of Brazilian honeybees with Southern African honeybees."

Having witnessed an attack by African honeybees on my family's dogs, I can vouch for the truth of these comments. This incident occurred when I was a teenager and both dogs had to have blood transfusions. They only survived because they jumped into the swimming

pool. It was a traumatic event for me, and I've written a few poems, paragraphs and a short story about killer bees.

Picture caption: My photograph of an African bee. They look pretty innocuous, don't they?

African honeybees are a lot more hostile than other bees due to their natural environment having far more predators looking to destroy their hives for honey. Some of these predators are ants, anteaters, armadillos, honey badgers, and bee eater birds. African honeybees attack in far greater numbers than Europeans bees which makes them dangerous to humans. When disturbed, they will also chase humans far further than European bees and remain agitated for much longer. However, it should be noted that the venom of African honeybees is no more toxic than European bees.

African honeybees occur in the natural veld of South African and Central Africa and is an important pollinator of flowering plants, including many thorn trees such as acacia trees (the favourite food of giraffes). Without African honeybees, southern Africa would not have many of the fruit and vegetables that grow in this region.

My photograph of a Little Bee-Eater

South African cultural stories about African honeybees

In the Xhosa culture (Madiba clan), visitation by a swarm of bees is presumed to be a message from the ancestors who would like the family to do something for them (e.g. the brewing of traditional African beer (*umqombothi*) and/or the slaughtering of a goat). If the bees produced honey while they were visiting, all honey combs will be removed by a member of the family and placed on small branches before being consumed. But most importantly, words of respect will be said to the bees as they are being persuaded to leave.

In the Pedi culture, a swarm of bees in the yard is always taken as a symbol of the ancestors bringing luck to the family. One needs to then prepare some kind of African beer, but it should not ferment like *umqombothi*. It is called *mashifa*, and the sorghum should still be strong and prevalent in the water. You then summon the ancestors accordingly and acknowledge their presence and let them know that you anticipate the good wishes or blessings. The bees are never chased away or killed, and are left in peace to leave of their own accord.

Also in the Pedi culture, the queen bee is used in traditional strengthening. The queen bee is alive when she reaches the traditional healer, but is then respectfully killed and mixed in with a concoction that is applied to the face daily or weekly. This is to subdue your enemies and command respect from those around you – just like the queen bee does in the colony.

This information is from the South African National Biodiversity Institute here: https://www.sanbi.org/animal-of-the-week/african-honeybee/

Invasion

The colonization of much of the western hemisphere by the African honey bee (*Apis mellifera scutellata)* in the last 60 years is one of the most rapid and impressive biological invasions in recent history (Schneider et al 2004). Originally, African honey bees were thought to displace European honey bee subspecies through hybridization and to give rise to “Africanized honey bees” in Latin America. However the incredible success of African bees that have invaded European populations, has led to much of the European characteristics to be lost and existing honey bee populations to remain essentially African in their nesting behavior (McNally and Schneider 1992), swarming and absconding behavior (Otis et al 2002; Rubink et al 1996; Schneider 1995; Schneider and McNally 1992 and 1994; Sousa et al 2002), foraging and diet selection (Fewell and Bertran 2002; Schneider and Hall 1997; Schneider and McNally 1993), and maternal DNA characteristics (Clarke et al 2001 and 2002; Hall 1999; Segura 1989).

This information is extracted from this article: https://bee-health.extension.org/africanized-bees-better-understanding-better-prepared/

Below is a poem duo I wrote about African bees. The poems are extracted from my book, *Lion Scream*.

Searching for a Home

An overcrowded hive
Results in a split
The old queen and her maids prepare for a move
Some drones are invited
To join their party
***
Scouts take off in a group
Searching high and low
For a safe and secure place to make their own
The swarm waits patiently
In a nearby tree
***
Under a wooden floor
The best place is found
The scouts return and perform their waggle dance
Giving clear directions
To the nesting site

Eviction

Prepped for occupation
The bees move in fast
Much to the chagrin of the resident dogs
Who attempt to drive off
The enemy force
***
The warriors line up
Ready for action
Their gold and black attire carefully designed
To strike fear into hearts
Ensuring respect
***
Unified bombardment
By the deadly cloud
Sends the dogs running, desperate to escape
Useless resistance
Swiftly overcome

By Robbie Cheadle

GLOBAL BIRDFAIR 12-14 JULY 2024

Tim Appleton and Penny Robinson spent another year working hard to bring things together to create this great event. To describe their work as stupendous is an understatement. It was the three-day International BirdFair event, held at Lyndon Top, a new site next to Rutland Water, close to the lovely little town of Oakham in our smallest county of Rutland.

So many events and activities on a continual rolling programme, speakers, projects, anticipation, all with an air of continual excitement. One thing above all coming out of this international event was its international spirit. People of all nationalities and cultures coming together in the cause not only of birds but of all wildlife, and to tell us all about the need to save the world we all love so much. The biggest thing that enthused me most was the presence of so many young naturalists. The early birdfairs attracted the attention of mainly oldies like me, but today things have changed, and the future of birdlife and the natural world has lots of young people with passion to change things for the better.

Young Conservationists (and Podcasters) at the BirdFair

As usual the show presented something for everyone of all ages. Naturalists took groups of children on short nature walks. The Discovery Zone Activities was run by the WildSpace Team and had activities for children every half hour on Saturday and on Sunday.

There were regular bird ringing demonstrations, which were hugely popular (I used to do a bit of bird ringing but early starts and late finishes did not suit me). It's a great thing for active naturalists to get involved in.

Simon King was present as usual supporting the Global Birdfair

The big attraction was the talks presented by so many well qualified individuals like: Jonathan and Angela Scott (founding members of our society), Nigel Marven, Simon King, Robert Fuller, David Lindo, Mike Dilger, Stephen Moss (who worked hard making sure everyone was where they should be, and hosted quite a few events in the Osprey Marquee), and Nick Baker. If you wanted to see the many television personalities you had to attend the really exciting programme of events held in the various marquees. As usual there was far too much to see in such a short space of time.

A first for the Society of Environmental Authors and Journalists

We were asked to film several events in the Osprey Marquee by Tim and Penny, and do a general look through at some of the Global BirdFairs main sponsors. I have for several years attended the event for the British Naturalists' Association writing for the Country-Side Magazine. But now, Steve and I attend the event for our Society. It was a privilege to be asked, which was because Steve did them a favour at last year's event in filming Tim Appleton's 'This is Your Life' event.

BirdFair partner: BirdLife International

Tim Appleton introduced Martin Harper to us as the new CEO of BirdLife International. This is a body with members from the world-wide body of birding organisations to combine their influence on world leaders and others to direct their attentions to our wonderful birds and what this means to us all. It is a battle against the huge titanic financial corporate bodies that affect our daily lives. They as institutions control all the power over us and our wildlife,

concerned only with profit, paying huge wages to their leaders who repeatedly destroy everything we hold dear, and paying their investors dividends. Their motivation is gross greed, as we recently saw in the pay of the boss of Thames Water. This body deserves and needs your support.

Martin Harper, CEO of BirdLife International

Bird Brain

This year saw the return of the Bird Brain event formerly the Bird Brain of Britain which was usually chaired by Bill Oddie. This year it was chaired by Stephen Moss. A set of bird questions, one round on specialist questions followed by general questions.

Contestants: Adam Riley, Billy Rodger, Chris Balchin, Victoria Saravia-Mullin

Tim Appleton presents this years Winner of the Charles Gallimore Trophy to Victoria Saravia-Mullin

In the smaller marquees we also had a lot of professional and amateur Naturalists giving talks, including our own society member professional naturalist **David Chandler**, who gave a talk on the use of optics, what type to buy and the choice of other optics to use.

David Chandler

The Global BirdFair is truly international, you can speak to people from all over the world, sit down for lunch and mix with other birders and naturalists, and just curious visitors. All are friendly and approachable.

You can meet representatives from hundreds of differing travel firms from Costa Rica Birding, Flamingo Tours in Ethiopia, the Gambia Tourism Board, and Guatamala Nature Tours to Nature Conservation Egypt, to name but a few. Many more local organisations were there including the RSPB, Leicestershire and Rutland Ornithological Society, the Mammal Society, to name but a few. Organisations in the field of conservation were also represented, not to forget the Dragonfly Trust.

I would encourage everyone to attend this magnificent event, to mix with well known faces, and meet those of the new generation of conservationists. Wherever you live this is the place to be, for naturalists and like minded people. Don't be put off by past images of lots of old folk running about with cameras and scopes, those days have gone. Nowadays, it's a great show for all. Come along and enjoy three days full of entertainment and excitement, bring your children to meet their wildlife heroes. We need our children to learn to appreciate the world we have, and aid the cause to prevent further destruction.

REFLECTIONS ON REALITIES

by Steve Shelley

The Sheffield Documentary Festival is high on the globetrotting agenda of film makers from all over the world, a category win making your production more likely to gain screenings and sales, and, by propelling you into the orbit of the high and mighty of the cinematographic world, may just lead you towards a pot of gold for your next project. This year's theme was 'Reflections on Realities'. The world it reflects is not a happy place.

Overall winner as voted by the audience was 'Strike: An Uncivil War' by Sheffield director Daniel Gordon. It tells the story of a violent confrontation between miners and police during the 1984/85 Miners' Strike dubbed 'The Battle of Orgreave'. Gordon's earlier film about the Hillsborough debacle reflects his local perspective as well as a quest for retrospective truth and justice. The present production is an exposé rooted in the eighties, the time of Margaret Thatcher and her declaration of war against the coal miners and the then powerful trade unions. My own focus on matters environmental suggests that 'environment' is as much a phenomenon in time as in place. It shifts in both dimensions. In this case, 'place' is South Yorkshire, specifically the Orgreave coking plant, site of the final showdown which changed the face of Britain and of the mining communities forever.

You could argue that the closure of the pits and the elimination of dirty and dangerous jobs did our wider environment a favour. The collieries with their headstocks, shunting yards and associated big industries were undoubtedly a scar on the landscape, contributing, amongst other things, to a prevalence of acid rain and emphysema. Without the concurrent emergence of the City of London's newly liberalised financial sector, these closures would have been economic suicide (inflicted by the same party who later would impose Brexit upon us).

But while Britain moved on (and temporarily up), the mining towns degenerated into slums based on welfare and drugs. The film explains in the raw how this was not only the result of government policy but of a marginally legal dirty tricks campaign waged outside parliamentary approval by a cabal of ministers, intelligence agencies and the police – supported by a sycophantic media that demonised the miners. You should watch the film for details (it's now on general release in the UK) but the essence was this.

Thatcher and her cronies deployed paramilitary tactics that had been devised to exert imperial suppression in the colonies, in particular Hong Kong. This involved pitching massed forces of uniformed police head to head with miners striking and picketing to prevent the loss of their jobs. The film showed repeated horseback charges sending the miners running. Many were arrested and charged with 'riot' which carried a potential life sentence, as against lesser crimes of affray or disorder. But when lawyers for the defence learned that the prosecution had chosen not to use their own video film in evidence, they discovered graphic details which immediately convinced the judge that the miners had not, indeed, been rioting. It was a fabrication. It was the police themselves who had provoked the strikers. The government, the police and the media had lied.

It's taken forty years to emerge but the truth is that our own government waged war on its own citizens. Orgreave and its industrial infrastructure was bulldozed to the ground. It's now the newly gentrified middle class Sheffield suburb of Waverley.

The theme of government against the people continues in ‘Our Land, Our Freedom’, a Kenyan production directed by Meena Nanji and Zippy Kimundu. The film follows Wanjugu Kimathi as she seeks redress for Mau Mau freedom fighters imprisoned, tortured and executed for daring to rebel against the British colonial government of occupation in the 1950s. It’s one thing to drag up ancient feuds like this and expect modern day Britain to own up to its past, but apparently equally naïve to expect your own government to side with you. Stalked by intelligence agents, harassed, intimidated and arrested without charge, Wanjugu must have wondered, as we are forced to conclude, if it’s true that governments collude with each other when suppression seems to offer a strategy of mutual advantage to those with something to hide, and to lose.

Wanjugu’s people brought their case to the Court of Human Rights. They accused a British owned grower of avocados of failing to return land it had grabbed from the Mau Mau. But their day in court came to an abrupt end. London based ‘silks’ had been employed to persuade the court that it had no jurisdiction in such ‘human rights’, and the court room was perfunctorily cleared. Rather than give in, the team mobilised a social media led boycott of Kenyan avocados in the UK. When it hurts the pocket, they observed, it really hurts. These repressive forces are motivated more by money than justice.

Well, we know about the repressive regimes of Russia, China, Burma, Syria, Israel and Venezuela (to name but a few) but Britain and Kenya? This is getting interesting, or should I say alarming.

My next film touched a raw nerve. It’s called ‘The Battle for Laikipia’. Yes, another battle. Laikipia is a region of northern Kenya which is one of last last great bastions of wildlife conservation. Large chunks were handed out after the Second World War as part of the officer settlement scheme. Much of it, typically in ranch size chunks of thirty thousand acres and more, remains in the hands of white descendants, three generations down the line. This tribe of white Kenyans is still barely recognised as a ‘thing’ but legally,

linguistically and economically they're firmly wedded to Kenya as it now is. The problem is, to make the space available, the British colonial government had to throw off the indigenous Masai and Samburu tribespeople. And they want it back.

But that's not the whole story. Some of the conservancies (ranches devoted to wildlife) are now owned by wealthy foreigners, some by trusts crafted to incorporate indigenous communities, and some by politically connected Kenyan elites. In terms of conflicts of interests, it's a fine mess.

Oh, and the British Army uses parts of the area as a live fire training ground.

As a further complication, the whole region is prone to drought. Seasonal migration by pastoral tribes has long formed a default survival mechanism. But private ownership has blockaded ancient pathways and confined people, their cattle and wildlife to ever smaller zones. Climate change exacerbates tensions, with longer gaps now occurring between shorter and heavier rains. But while the climate and conflict go hand in hand, there's yet another inflammatory ingredient.

In 2017, in the lead up to an election, opposing parties opted to play the indigenous rights card. And to show the incumbent president their strength – and his incapacity – they mobilised an armed invasion of what they saw as foreign occupied land. Samburu tribespeople invaded from the east, ostensibly in search of grazing for their drought struck cattle. And from the west, Pokot tribesmen were armed and mobilised. They set fire to properties. They killed people. Drought featured as proxy for a political power play.

I must now admit to my own interest. The featured families in this film are long term friends. Their kids were in school with mine. I know the area well. I was there last March. I had lunch with Maria, the main character, in the midst of it all, what she dubbed the 'Mufuriki Invasions' in her daily blog. Her son George was there too, his arms covered in scaly lesions of stress-induced eczema brought on by the responsibility of defending the family property at the tender age of 22. The government was incapable of mobilising the armed forces to protect us, so weak was their political position. So they gave us guns to defend ourselves, she told me.

The finely nuanced production ended as I knew it must with Maria's death, brought about by stress-induced cancer caused by months of living in fear certain that no-one was looking out for them in the crossfire between the factions. Governments and the feuding politicians came and went. The Samburu felt they had lost the battle. The Pokots went home. The white tribe of Kenya learned, as if they needed any lesson, that they're living on borrowed time. And, as ever, wildlife and the environment were just collateral victims.

Solutions may lie in our own hands but problems are induced by design, or so says Dr Chris van Tulleken in a new BBC documentary 'Irresistible: Why We Can't Stop Eating'. Poor diet has overtaken tobacco as the leading cause of early death, he says. Insider interviews reveal the dark side of the global food processing industry. Scientists explore precisely what addicts people to their company's products, whether it be fatty or sweet ingredients or even a satisfying crunch. Read the list of ingredients, says Dr van T. If your grandmother wouldn't recognise it as a food, don't eat it. Yet our supermarket shelves are

bursting with Ultra Processed Foods (UPFs) emblazoned with spurious health and 'eco' claims. The rise in obesity, diabetes and certain cancers correlates with the prevalence of these industrial products in which chemicals masquerade as nutrition hidden behind colourful packaging and creative labelling.

Governments (again) are either powerless or complicit because the big manufacturers – household names, for the most part – fund them, finance 'think tanks' and spurious research, and manipulate media coverage. Time and again, efforts to curb sugary and fatty foods and the adverts which promote them have been thwarted. Like oil and gas companies and emissions, like tobacco companies and lung cancer, the world's big food processors are poisoning us under the noses of our legislators. It's almost as if there's a conspiracy . . . oh, there is! In the 1980s, tobacco giants Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds acquired major food companies such as Kraft, General Foods and Nabisco, allowing tobacco firms to dominate America's food supply, deploy their tried and tested addiction playbook, and reap billions in sales.

In 'Plastic People: The Hidden Crisis of Microplastics', Canadian directors Ben Addelman and Ziya Tong reveal that indestructible fragments of plastic and so-called 'forever chemicals' have found their way not only into our the air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat but also into our bodies, bloodstream and across impermeable membranes into our brains. And not just occasionally but everywhere, inside everyone. Our bodies' defence mechanisms do not recognise such invaders as benign and respond accordingly. Hence, says Dr Tong, an epidemic of allergies, inflammatory disease and cancers. There has been essentially no research on long term health risks and next to no effort to reduce plastics in the environment. This is not a ticking time bomb, it's a disaster already unravelling. Enough said on this one.

By this time, a different perspective on matters environmental was more than welcome. I turned to 'At the Door of the House Who will Come Knocking?' by Maja Novaković from Srebrenica, Bosnia and Hertzegovina. The scene is of winter in the snowy mountains where an old man lives in solitude with just a horse for a companion. The beauty and lack of pace are astonishingly calming after the rage of the earlier films. The filming is extraordinarily intimate, the story human and ultimately deeply emotional. Maja spent two seasons literally shacked up with her camera and admits to having to straighten out her own emotional shaking in post-production. This is documentary as art in its finest sense. And a reminder that living sustainably amidst nature is not always the most comfortable proposition. This film deservedly won the DocFest's International Grand Jury Award.

(You can find trailers for all these films on YouTube)

NEW MEMBER

Our newest member is Dr Laurie Marker who is the Director of the Cheetah Conservation Fund. She is based in Namibia, where she created the Cheetah Rescue and Conservation Centre and the International Research and Education Facility. I will give you fuller details about Laurie in future issues.

END NOTES

It's now half-way through our summer in England, whilst some of you are in your mid-winter.

Being a world-wide organisation we have a long way to go to start reaching our goals. Membership growth is a major concern for us. We are slowly growing, and we have kept our membership fees at nothing, but that does not appear to be helping. **How many colleagues or associates do you have who write about environmental matters?**

Ask them to check out our website and if they approve of what they see, get them to join us for a free lifetime membership. Just email Steve Shelley or myself:

ss@steveshelley.org drrobert.tansey@talktalk.net

As I repeat often our perception of 'Environment' is all inclusive. Recently Steve and I have been reviewing the archaeological site of former Roman Town 'Segelocum' near the River Trent in North Nottinghamshire, here in England. There's nothing to actually see now but aerial photos show the layout of the town clearly and a road going through the middle of it. I was just having a casual walk around the main field the other day and collected a few small items of interest including a small piece of roman glass, bits of broken pottery, etc. We have permission of the farmer to walk where we want but not to metal detect, being a protected site. We know there was a road across the river in Roman times (not a bridge). The river was wider in those days and not so deep, but modern-engineers have diverted it

to became a major waterway. We are looking for evidence that the narrow main road has also changed over the years. We will let you know in due course.

If you have any experience in the field of archaeology, let us know. We also would like to see a few articles about interesting estate gardens that members can visit. Britain in particular has hundreds of gardens open to public access for a fee, let's hear about them.

Best wishes to you all

Robert