

Operation New World

By

John Blashford-Snell

In 1992, following our success with Operation Raleigh, a new programme was set up by Anne Leonard and myself with the support of the Scientific Exploration Society. It aimed to provide an innovative education programme for young people, culminating in an expedition overseas to develop environmental awareness, leadership and community spirit.

HE Walter Annenberg, former US Ambassador in Britain and President of Op Raleigh, generously provided the funds to launch the venture. In 1994 the first expedition took 26 students from the American School in London and the Lake Ridge Academy of Cleveland, Ohio and Panama to the remote Caledonia Bay in Panama. Here, in the territory of the Cuna Indians, we carried out environmental and archaeological studies on the ruins of the lost Scottish Colony, aided by a charming and energetic Colombian economist, Yolima Cipagauta. Several members of the Scientific Exploration Society came along to help.

Some American parents expressed concern about the safety of their children so on arrival in Panama I asked the Ministry of Education who were supporting the project if they could provide some local security personnel. Thus a pair of tough officers from the Guardia Nacional (Panamanian Police) were made available. When interviewing them, I asked if they had any personal insurance and the name of the company. 'Si' replied these hard-featured policemen, 'Smith and Wesson'.

Yolima chartered some local planes to fly the team to the San Blas Islands and canoes to take them to the old Op Raleigh campsite at Caledonia Bay. She also found a yacht that would bring all the camp stores and rations to the site.

We arrived in this isolated jungle location with the pupils looking excited and rather scared. On an early trip in the rainforest Anne Leonard was horrified to discover that in spite of some pre-expedition training by the US Army, none of the children could use a compass! 'What did you do on your preparation course?' she asked them. 'We just bonded' they replied.

Although the Cuna Indians were pretty friendly, we had one unfortunate incident when some one climbed aboard our supply yacht to steal rations and a very expensive Army radio. However, the Guardia Nacional officers soon found an Indian teenager whom they believed to be the culprit. 'He is the one' stated Corporal Rodrigues, but the lad refused to confess so the officer handcuffed him to a palm tree saying 'I leave him for a while until his memory improves'. Later I noticed the boy looking very uncomfortable. 'Perhaps his memory has returned' stated the policeman and indeed the accused confessed and our radio was returned. We handed him back to the angry Cuna chief and the village women popped him in the communal toilet pit as a punishment. That night the students were somewhat upset by the way the matter had been handled so I explained that we were guests in Panama and had to respect local ways

of handling crime. 'Indeed,' I said to him 'If a burglary in London was solved so speedily I'd be surprised and we appreciate Corporal Rodrigues' action'. Whereupon the officer jumped up saying 'It is not me you must thank but the ants at the foot of the tree!'

After 12 days we emerged from the jungle, and Yoli's aircraft came in to collect us, but the door fell off one just after take-off. Some had to stay a night on the remote airstrip and when a large jungle cat approached, the policeman's gun jammed. However, the students got safely home a little wiser and more mature!

Back in Britain Anne kindly agreed to take over the Chairmanship of the operation and for 24 years, led this unique venture until it closed this year.

By 1996 the Operation had become a self-help educational programme for unemployed young people, including ex-offenders (aged 20-25). It aimed to increase their employability skills so that participants could cease relying on 'benefits' and find worthwhile jobs.

Anne remembers the adventures and successes of this unique operation fondly.

'I chose Hungary as the location for our first expedition, because of the way it had been described by Hungarian noblemen I had met at Trinity College Dublin in the 1960s all bewailing their lost lands, money, castles and so on. And talking about horsemen on the great plains and Liszt and Chopin and much romance and so on.

Of course, when we got there there was nothing like this. The modern incumbents robbed us rotten having been brought up in the Soviet Union and with no knowledge of the West and our strange ideas of honesty. They thought we were mad and we quickly learned that they were crooks. They stole everything they could get their hands on, all the time smiling and being nice. I tackled them with their misdeeds. "We had to live under the Soviet Union" they replied. It was awful, and you had everything in the West. Coca Cola and Elvis and now it's our turn. You owe us"!

We soon found that it wasn't Coca Cola that they were after. Vodka cost 30p a pint after a big profit to themselves and they were bringing pints and pints into camp cunningly disguised in the bowser disguised as water. Soon all the students were drunk. It was strong stuff.

This would not do! So I found an alternative site. Holy Island, off Arran, founded by Tibetan monks. No way of getting off it other in one small boat when the weather was good. No smoking, no drink and the bottles smuggled in were soon empty. Some of the students said they were afraid they might die. Well, none of them did but, due to our presence we did [inadvertently] kill a goat one year later, a horse. So after three visits we had to give that destination up too. It was a pity, for some of the students said afterwards it had been the happiest time of their lives!

Where next? I heard of an island down near the Equator – in the Canary Islands. Nice and warm. No frost. No snow, for once on Holy Island a fall of snow had frozen the zip on my tent and shouts to the students to get me out brought no action. I heard one of them saying they could leave me there.

Who were the students? All came from Job Centres, drawing benefits, and joining Farnborough College of Technology for a fifteen week course in “Environmental Studies”. Op New World was a lure to get them onto the Adventurous study programme.

The staff at Farnborough saw at once that those on this course were more bonded and happier than any of their other full time students seemed to be, or so they thought. The Farnborough instructors, who took part in the early courses stayed with us. Dr Colin Ryall, Colin Bailey, Dr Todd Lewis, Tim Jenkins, were on the first outings and some of them on the last few when we were joined by John Nicholls, a farmer and photographer. Dr Colin Ryall at the beginning had just returned from Kenya where his uncle had been eaten by a lion some years earlier. “An old manky one, he told us, with no teeth which he, Colin, thinks was a bit of a disgrace. Colin thought Op New World was a challenge and wrote the special course which aimed to fit the unemployed students for a full time place on the college programme.

At that time, we were receiving huge help from 2 Signal Brigade under Brigadier John Neeve. 39 Signal Regiment ran fabulous weekend training weekends for some years and thus were, for a time our greatest sponsors. We always had two officers or NCOs giving us a hand on the overseas trips, providing a safety net. At one stage we got an NCO who was teetotal . This was Pete Rendall who was such a novelty that I took him on as I thought he provided an extra level of safety.

Eventually, as the years went by, we had to bin the Benefits Office's recruits and it proved impossible to find anybody without a degree. This lot were all working as baristas, waiters, night watchmen etc – without any training in any of these pursuits. Worst of all, some were working as “carers” in old people’s homes. They had been let down badly in today’s so called “Universities”, learning very little – not enough to get them professional employment and crippled with debt.

Our course has been a life line for many, who have re-set their careers thanks to the inspirational teaching of the staff and we received many testimonials to this effect.

Of course, we have had some terrible people too. Many only appreciate what had been done for them after the plane has dropped them off at Gatwick. Apart from superb teaching and guidance as to what to do next, they have formed friendships usually only experienced in boarding schools, and other social habits such as table manners, public speaking and so on.

No one had to pay for any of this. If we had charged, nobody would have signed up. So you might ask where I got the money from. I had none and was working full time. So I gave up the full time job early in the proceedings. I worked part-time instead. No office, just a computer in my bedroom for over twenty years. But I always raised enough – enough to pay the bills. Anything between £45,000 and £94,000 per annum, more or less depending on delivery by Royal Mail. Never in debt we were always in credit in a modest way.

Results were, in spite of bad behaviour at times, almost unanimously good. I reckoned, again and again, over 90% of the students were successful in getting onto a career ladder. We are still in touch with many who came on a course up to twenty five years ago. Indeed, this has been a massive success with around fifty courses, all with an overseas project included, free of charge.'

After 27 years devoted to this charity, Anne decided to retire and with no-one available to take over, the trustees decided to close down Operation New World passing the small balance of funds to the Scientific Exploration Society which is doing great work encouraging young 'pioneers with a purpose'.

However, there is no doubt that the success of Operation New World was almost entirely due to the selfless determination, energy and enthusiasm of Anne Leonard. This remarkable lady justly received the MBE in recognition of her dedication to the organisation that has guided over 2000 young people to a useful and worthwhile future.

Much credit is also due to distinguished educator David Pritchard, Accountant David Zeitlin and earlier the late Philip Charlton, as well as Professor John Adair, who joined the charity's Council and gave valuable advice and guidance.

OP NEW WORLD

Assorted photos of Op New World's expeditions, 1994 – 2018, thanks to JBS, Colin Ryall and Colin Bailey.



JBS & Cuna, Caledonia Bay 1994



Deep in the Jungle, Caledonia Bay 1994



The expedition, Caledonia Bay 1994



Supporting Yacht and camp, Caledonia Bay 1994



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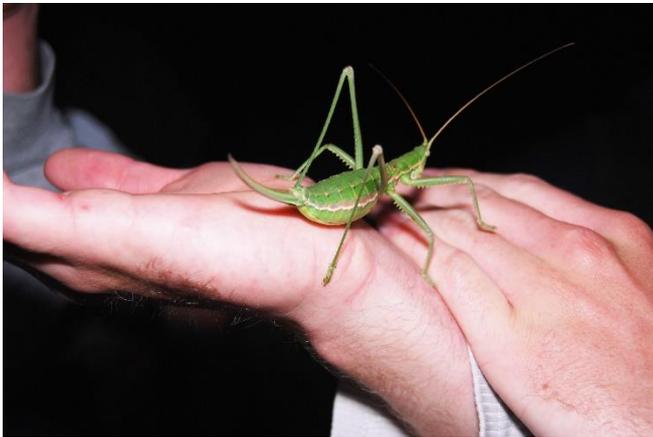
Anne & Jean-Claude, Corsica



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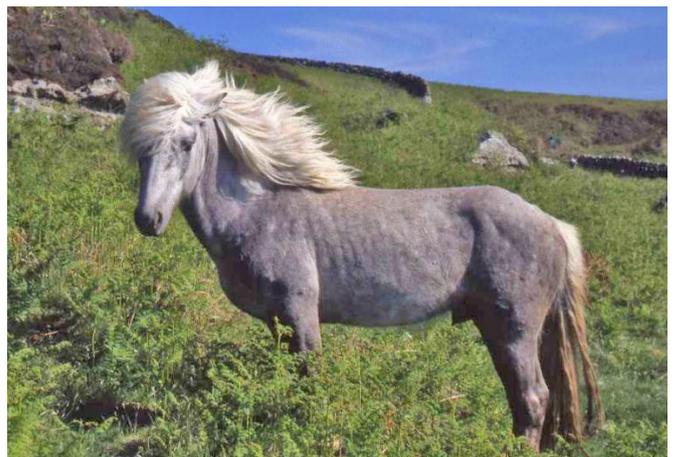
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Early Corsica 1



Eriskay Stallion



Fuerte March 2003



Holy Island 3



Holy Island 4



Holy Island 5



Holy Island summit



Holy Island



Hungary. JBS briefing team



Jacobean Ram



ONW Corsham with John Neeve and his team



Stephan



Sweden



Visby, Sweden and Anne, deep in thought