

## **RGS panel on delivering research on behalf of former Society expedition leaders**

Presentation on Friday 27 November

### **1. Correction of misunderstandings about past RGS-sponsored research projects:**

- a) There were **18 multi-disciplinary research projects** between the mid-1950s and mid-1990s – 7 in Larry Kirwan's time as Director, 11 in John Hemming's time.
- b) The **finances** of all of these projects were **separate** from the Society's. They all raised their own funds and all broke even (two even made surpluses that were paid to the Society).
- c) The projects did **not draw on the RGS funds or overheads** in any way. This is confirmed by all the published annual accounts. No staff were added to the Society's payroll for projects – these used volunteers and paid their expenses from their own funds.
- d) The projects did not draw on or affect **the Society's grant-giving** to university expeditions or academic researchers in any way. The number of such grants reached a peak in the 1980s - at the time when there were most sponsored projects in the field. This was because the funds for such grants came from donations and legacies and were ring-fenced. (In fact the three largest such donations, received recently and amounting to some £1.5 million, came from donors who were impressed by RGS-sponsored research projects!)
- e) Fundraising for big research projects did not **jeopardise the Society's fundraising** for core costs, education, collections, the building or other purposes. This is because grants for field research are very precisely targeted and restricted to that research, and would not be available for other activities. The multi-disciplinary nature of some projects appealed to some grant-givers, who might not have supported research involving only geographers.

### **2. Advice on how to make projects break-even**

The Society must be careful in choosing which projects to sponsor. But if it gets it right there are great benefits. Lessons learned in the past are:

- a) Try to get an invitation from the host country or close links with its scientists and government. The most successful projects had such an invitation or links, so that most of their logistics (particularly base camps) were provided by the host or by a company linked to it. (cf. Malaysian military for Mulu; Australian army, Kimberley; Brazilian environment agency, Maracá; Jordanian government, Badia; Taylor-Woodrow and Omani govt., Wahibah; Shell, Brunei Temburong.)

- b) Only let researchers go into the field after their research programme is funded.
- c) Have a leader who will be concerned with fundraising and finances as much as the scientific programme, membership, etc. Keep a tight grip on budget and expenditure.
- d) Seek donations in kind (transport, equipment, food and medical supplies) as well as money grants.
- e) Never pay for publishing. Popular and scientific books must get commercial publishers; academic papers in peer-reviewed journals.
- f) Use volunteers extensively.

### 3. Other points of interest to the panel:

- a) The RGS Expeditions Committee decided not to attempt projects in either the **polar regions or deep oceans**. This is because research in these is admirably done by public agencies such as BAS (British Antarctic Survey) or IOS (Institute of Oceanographic Sciences), because such research requires logistics and equipment that is far too expensive for the RGS, and because there are no host-country researchers with whom to liaise.
- b) Some multidisciplinary projects did do good **human geography** as well as physical. (cf. Karakoram, Maracá, particularly Jordan Badia, Wahibah.) All countries are wary of foreigners studying their people. So permission to do human-geography research is more likely in the context of a large multi-disciplinary project that works closely with host-country scientists than for a small expedition or project.
- c) Academics participating in projects **can receive grants or funds** into their university department, and then pay the project for per-diems of time spent in the field. The grant income is thus acknowledged by HEFCE, as of course are the peer-reviewed papers that result from research on the project. For instance, Professor John Thornes did this with the grant for his research programme on the Maracá Rainforest Project.  
The cost of participation is far less in this way than if academics had to organise it themselves. The RGS project does all the work of permissions, logistics, accommodation, travel, staffing, etc. Researchers get to work as soon as they arrive.
- d) There is probably **more funding available for good research** now than in the past, particularly if the research relates in some way to climate change. There are new sources such as the Darwin Initiative, EU and Lottery, and grant-giving foundations and companies are keener now than in the past to support environmental work. Many British NGOs, institutions and charities currently have fully-funded research teams in the field.

#### 4. Benefits from RGS multidisciplinary projects

- a) Such projects can attract the **best researchers**, because they are under the Society's banner and because the project does all the preparatory and administrative work. The result is research of the highest quality.
- b) There are great benefits from international cooperation, working with **local scientists**, who know their terrain, and on work that they want done. Links and friendships are established with people who often rise to the top of their country's scientific establishment.
- c) Interaction between scientists of **different disciplines** is often very productive. The RGS should be outward-looking, both internationally and to kindred disciplines in addition to geography.
- d) Successful projects greatly enhance the **Society's reputation**, through resulting publicity in all forms of media, international respect, and pride by the Society's members, staff and officers – read past Presidential Addresses to see how delighted they were by each project.

Each project leader could list its achievements, in: research and discoveries, publications (particularly peer-reviewed), collections, links with host country, media publicity, long-term benefits (such as creation of protected areas, subsequent invitations, citations and ongoing use of published research, etc.), number of participants who benefited, duration.