

Burns in Bangladesh

Malcolm Beveridge recounts his many visits to Bangladesh



Current PhD students visiting Malcolm at his new job



Among my many memories of foreign travel, Bangladesh dominates. Indeed, my collaboration with scientists at BAU Mymensingh was the most important factor in my research work throughout the late 1980s and 1990s. I owe a great deal to Dr Wahab and his colleagues for their inspiration, hard work, commitment and friendship.

I met Md Abdul Wahab, then a young PhD student at the Institute, in early 1984. We became good friends and indeed, when one of his supervisors, Hadrian Stirling, took a sabbatical, I assumed his role. I first visited the country some years later in 1987; between then and 2001 by my reckoning I made twenty-four visits to the country, always to Dhaka, always to Mymensingh. I occasionally visited other places, such as Khulna or Parbatipur, but never made it to Chittagong or elsewhere in the south.

Research

Between 1987 and 1991, my visits were funded through an ODA research grant, investigating the methods of filter feeding in tilapias and Indian major carps. Working with colleagues at BAU, Stirling and the University of Dundee, we found out much about how herbivorous fish entrapped single-cell algae and how they distinguished between toxic and non-toxic strains of cyanobacteria. The work not only stimulated further exploration of grazing in warm-water food fishes, but a decade later, led to a Link-Aquaculture project with Scot-Trout and the Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, investigating the development and management of algal induced off-flavours in farmed trout. In the mid-1990s, visits were on account of the ODA/BAU Faculty of Fisheries development programme. Alan Tollervey was project

coordinator and for a number of years lived with his family on campus. We were spoiled: the BAU guesthouse was upgraded with a new AC, fridge and furniture in the rooms, and there was often an invitation or two to dine with Alan and his family. Most of our time was spent deliberating over the various course curricula and developing teaching materials with Faculty staff.

In the late 1990s and early years of this century, the DFID-funded CARE-CAGES project and an EC Framework 5 project (PAISA, involving BAU and Mangalore, Stirling and Wageningen) were the principal reasons for my travel to the country. Associated with the CARE-CAGES development project was a small research component that looked at factors such as environmental impacts and carrying capacity and production of local food fishes. Our PAISA project on periphyton-based aquaculture systems proved highly successful due to the enormous commitment and efforts of our BAU colleagues in particular. By this time, the BAU campus boasted a fantastic pond resource for field work. At the last count, the project produced more than 20 peer-review journal papers and there is also a book in progress.

Personal memories

Memories? I have so many. Over the years, either through my visits to Bangladesh or through Bengalis who came to study in Stirling, I made many good friends, especially from BAU: Drs Wahab, Dewan, Rahmatullah, Ekram, Hossain. Although I no longer am directly in touch, we e-mail from time to time.

During the early years, the BAGHA was my base in Dhaka. It was one of the few places where it was possible for westerners to eat. Today, of course, there are dozens of restaurants to choose from. Latterly, I stayed at the CARE Guesthouse on the other side of the city, a pleasant place close to the CARE offices. A host of names comes flooding back: Kenny McAndrew, Alan Tollervey, Paul Bulcock, Mike Akester, Rick Gregory, Stuart Bunting, Kai Lorenzen, Camillo Gray, Daryl Depperd, Sylvain Huchette, John Hambrey, Nana Roos. Seventeen years ago, Dhaka was a huge, sprawling city, but had the good fortune of having few cars. I noted at the time of my last visit in 2001, that the time taken to travel from Dhaka to Mymensingh had nearly doubled, despite the road improvements and new bridges, due to the phenomenal increase in road traffic. Air pollution in Dhaka had become intolerable at times.

You had to stay at BAU for a week or two to appreciate the finer points of life on campus. Slowly, you became accustomed to the change in pace and became a little bit calmer. The guesthouse was tucked away in a quiet corner of the campus, between the tennis courts and the

staff club. The mighty Brahmaputra was a stone's throw away and there was always something of interest to see: river dolphins, fishermen, barges and people strolling up and down its banks. The walk from the guesthouse to the Faculty of Fisheries took fifteen minutes. It was pleasant in the cool of the morning: first, a squeeze through the gap between the permanently locked compound gates, a task that mysteriously grew more difficult over the years, then the walk past the professors' houses, one of which had a renowned rose garden that scented the air. Next was a careful negotiation of the main road through the campus, crammed with tricycle rickshaws, then past a small market, the mosque and more staff and student houses. The red-bricked Faculty buildings were approached via a path past the small experimental fishponds where we conducted our early research work. Life on campus was simple. After a day's work, visiting scientists would be back at the guesthouse by about 6 o'clock. Dinner comprised rice, vegetables and either fish or meat, occasionally enlivened with specialities such as 'chop'. A couple of hours scribbling, tapping into a laptop or reading and it was time to call it a day. Occasionally, there would be an invitation to a staff member's house for a meal. This meant negotiating the quiet, and confusing network of footpaths around the campus in the dark, with the evocative smell of smoke and food drifting from student and staff houses. I well recall the superb Bengali cuisine at Dr Wahab's and Dr Rahmatullah's and the Hill-Tracks influenced cooking at Dr Dewan's house.

In the early days, I would occasionally visit ODA/EC staff in Parbatipur, especially Mike Akester and Rick Gregory, who were always pleased to see us and were most hospitable. I remember one night in particular, during the 1990 World Cup, when on the spur of the moment we set off to look for shooting stars. The streets in the centre of Dinajpur were impassable as hundreds of local fans crowded round shop windows watching the televised live football. Dodging up a side street, we eventually made it out into the countryside, stopping where the light pollution was minimal and lay on the roof of the Landrover for an hour pointing and counting the myriads of shooting stars. I remember too the hospitality at DANIDA project manager Camillo Gray's house on the outskirts of Mymensingh, complete with Italian food and rock music. There was a memorable Burns Supper at Alan Tollervey's house, complete with Scottish delicacies that Donald Baird and I had carefully carried over: haggis, oatcakes, tablet and, of course, 'uisgebeatha'. Coincidentally, my last visit to Bangladesh in January - February 2001, was also marked by a Burns Supper thanks to Kenny McAndrew who had secured us tickets for the Dhaka Burns Night, complete with speeches, poetry and dancing.

