

Hazards of butterfly collecting. Butterflies and surgical contraception – Yemen, 1980

In 1980 and 1981, I undertook two long expeditions to Yemen as part of my programme to complete a doctorate on the butterflies of the Middle East. In those days Yemen was still a very remote place. In fact, it had been almost impossible for foreigners to enter for centuries. The traditional Imams had been dead against any innovation. They were under the nominal suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire, but the governor rarely set foot outside his pleasant office in Hodeida on the coast. On average he probably only saw the Imam in Sana'a once or twice a year.

The First World War brought an end to Ottoman rule, but made the Imam even more determined to ignore the world around him. That could not last and during the 1950s and 1960s Nasserist republicanism simmered and then bubbled. In 1962, the Imam was deposed by his own army, which had developed revolutionary leanings. This led to a protracted civil war between royalists and republicans. Egypt intervened in the conflict – one already messy and stupid enough without outside intervention. At one point Egypt had 75,000 troops in Yemen and nearly bankrupted itself to no visible benefit to any of the parties involved. Egypt had to withdraw after its humiliation in the 1967 six-day war. Yemen had a succession of abysmal republican governments which hardly controlled their own administrative structures, much less the country. But by the mid-1970s a more or less decent government evolved that was generally accepted as a national government. By 1977, the country gradually opened up to foreigners and I took the opportunity to go. Yemen was potentially very interesting and little butterfly research had been done there. It also sounded like a pretty exciting place – even potentially hazardous! I had been advised to visit the Wadi Annah and the Wadi Dur below Ibb. When I got there an armed dispute between the government and the locals was going on. I said I had come all the way from London to study butterflies and that I really must reach Wadi Annah. The two commanders conferred and I was escorted with great courtesy across the frontline during a specially arranged ceasefire! One butterfly is now commemorated as *Neptis serena annah* – so a belated 'thank you' to the two commanders.

It was exciting – one of the most exciting things I have ever done. Butterflies were everywhere – from the savannahs of the Tihama coast, where temperatures are higher than on a bad day in coastal Baluchistan, to the cool mountains at above 2,500m. Working as Coordinator of Evaluation for the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) I had made an advance set of specified objectives for the expedition for the trip, with verifiable indicators. I do not think the Carlsberg Foundation was overly interested in this approach, but I was, and it was a fun thing to do since I spent most of my time insisting that others did so.

I was mostly at the top of my success criteria. My various trips to Yemen and Oman increased the known number of Arabian butterflies from 130 to more than 150. About a dozen were new species or subspecies. Very few additional species have been found in Arabia since then (I must update all this now that I have finalised my West Africa book). There have been some major range extensions, though

mostly unsurprising. History will have to judge whether I really combed the place or whether my many successors did badly!

My budget did not stretch to a personal vehicle – I had been too modest in my grant request to the Carlsberg Foundation (in fact these trips were in great contrast to my earlier trips to Oman, which even allowed the use of helicopters). Most of the time I used shared taxis, but sometimes I had to hire one for myself for a few days to get to very special places where I had been advised I must go. I do have a bit of Arabic. One of my drivers had been to the Gulf and had a smattering of English. He was deeply religious. We always stopped at prayer time, he to pray and me to check out the butterflies, but he bore his religion lightly. On the second day he suggested that I should convert to Islam. My Arabic did not stretch to a discussion about atheism so I replied that I lived in Christian country, my wife was Christian, as was my entire family – it would be rather awkward. He shrugged his shoulders: “We are all people of the book.” During three months of roaming the remotest parts of Yemen, my status as a *Nasrani* (Christian) was never a problem.



Surveying a fantastic valley above Ibb. I caught a species new to science here and much else. I also seem to be much younger in 1980 than now.

I do not know how it is now, but in 1980 you could go anywhere and the local community was obliged to give you a bed – usually in the reception room that was used for qat-chewing sessions. Food and conversation, as much as could be managed with my Arabic, would usually follow. I would also be taken on a tour of the village to see the modest places of interest – a well that was built 200 years ago or a particularly nice footbridge – but I never had the feeling that my reception was an obligation – I felt genuinely welcome.

I also visited the Mission Hospital at Jibla near Ibb. When I was working with the IPPF in Beirut they had requested help with vasectomy. This request had dumbfounded us. In 1974 we could hardly talk about contraception in most Arab countries, much less surgical contraception, and Yemen was the very last place from where such a request might be expected. We sent a letter – yes, we might well be able to help – but what was the background to this? Yemen and vasectomy hardly added up. There was an interesting explanation. Many Yemeni men had learnt of vasectomy from the Indian expatriate community in the Gulf – at the time some 20 percent of all Yemeni men worked in the Gulf in menial capacities. The Indians were generally more educated and well versed in family planning: they provided informal communication channels with a vengeance. I met a nice Baptist doctor, Martha Myers. The laparoscope we had donated five years earlier was still in use and other family planning supplies had been received from IPPF. A couple of their staff members had attended IPPF training courses since I left Beirut for London. Family planning apart, the Jibla hospital was by far the best in Yemen and the dedication of the missionaries truly impressive. We had a pleasant dinner and evening – though I am still not fully comfortable with the “And Lord, we pray for the success of Torben’s butterfly research and his safe return to London” bit on such occasions.

One of my hosts in Yemen, Leigh Douglas, was kidnapped and murdered in Lebanon, but this had nothing to do with his role in Yemen. It is, however, with much sadness that I have to report that on 30 December 2002 Martha and two of her colleagues were shot dead by an Islamist fanatic. First, since Martha was a gentle soul, who gave much of her life to helping the Yemenis. Second, because this brutal act demonstrates such a change in the sensible and sensitive faith in Islam that I saw throughout my own extensive travels. I am sure my taxi-driver would have thoroughly disapproved, though come 2002, I am not very sure that he would have been willing to express his disapproval of this terrible act in public. That is perhaps the saddest part of the story.— TORBEN B. LARSEN, UNDP Vietnam, c/o Palais des Nations, 1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland (E-mail: torbenlarsen@netnam.vn).



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