

Other Than Editing

by Rita M Washko

Ian Beecroft: Editor and White-Water Kayaker

Ian Beecroft loves his work as an editor. As managing editor of the *European Journal of Cardio-Thoracic Surgery* (based in Switzerland), Beecroft deals with many types of people, gets to travel, and feels a sense of satisfaction when each issue is completed and distributed to the journal's readers. "This is a fascinating but challenging time to be working in the science-publishing industry", Beecroft says. He also loves white-water kayaking.

Beecroft was born in Aston-under-Lyne, an industrial town east of Manchester, United Kingdom, in 1959. His introduction to kayaking was in the Boy Scouts. When he was 13, he and fellow scouts built a fleet of kayaks to navigate the local waterways. Shortly thereafter, he joined the Manchester Canoe Club, which is involved in river canoeing and kayaking. Beecroft got involved in competitive slalom kayaking (paddling a kayak between gates suspended over the river) around the age of 14 and later represented Britain in international competitions. "I've been enjoying kayaking for more than 30 years", he says.

Beecroft's love for the outdoors influenced his choice of majors in college. After completing a degree in geology at the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom, he did research at the University of Southampton, also in the United Kingdom. Initially, he worked as a geologist studying glacier activity in the mountains of Switzerland. But that was before the worldwide concern about global warming and its environmental impact, and funding was scarce. After 3 years of glacier work, he landed a position with the publisher Elsevier; he worked initially in Lausanne, Switzerland, and then in Ireland. His position in Ireland involved coordinating the transfer of production of Elsevier's European Union (EU) clinical-medicine list of about 30 medical journals from Amsterdam to Shannon. "I didn't think I'd last for more than 5 minutes" in an editorial role, he says, because he had such passion for the outdoors. But he stayed with Elsevier for 11 years and then went to work for his current employer as managing editor.

In his current role, Beecroft manages the

processes of journal review, production, and finance. "I oversee all aspects, from receipt of new manuscripts to publication both in print and online. This involves managing our Bench Press manuscript processing system—coordinating with authors, reviewers, associate editors, and the editor-in-chief—and then working with the desk editors, typesetters, printers, distributors, and online journal facilitators." He likes the fact that his journal activities bring him into contact with "all sorts of people". And he gets to travel as well. Beecroft says that he travels all over Europe and often to the United States. In April 2005, between conferences, he went kayak surfing in Santa Cruz, California, "and learned some colorful language from the local board surfers".

Outdoor sports provide a refreshing contrast to his daytime role as editor, Beecroft says. "I've kept an active interest in the glaciers. The glaciers in the Alps are taking a bashing [these days]", he says. Although he no longer studies glacier activity for a living, he still gets into the mountains quite often. He also kayaks often, usually four or five times a week in the Alps and other EU locations during the warmer months. "There is a fantastic river surfing spot on the River Rhone" only 30 km from his house from which he launches his kayak at the end of his workday. He calls the Rhone's temperature of about 8°C "refreshing".

Given that Beecroft has not only a full-time job but also a wife and family, his excursions to places farther away are less frequent. The family does not join him on his excursions, but it does "all sorts of other things together", and all are involved in the outdoors—his 18-year-old daughter recently returned from climbing Island Peak in Nepal. Every year or so, Beecroft and a group of trusted friends select an exotic, remote location for white-water kayaking. Each location is discovered by "bush telegraph" (word of mouth). On average, 15 to 20 people go on the 8- to 10-day excursions. Occasionally, Beecroft brings his 2.42-m, 15-kg kayak along, depending on the airline's rules and the regulations



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of the country of destination. Although he and his friends never use a guide, they do occasionally hire “raft support” from local river-rafting companies to transport their food and gear.

Many of the places Beecroft travels to are extremely cold. For example, in August 2005, he kayaked the Zanskar River in Northern India, an excursion he describes as an “amazing trip down the Grand Canyon of Asia. Zanskar is a fantastic and wild place, a desert in the Himalayas at 3500 m [over 11,000 ft] altitude with a huge icy river running through it.” The Zanskar River is accessible only a few months of the year. The rest of the time, the river is frozen and serves as the major thoroughfare for the local people and their animals; yaks and their owners can be seen journeying along it. But despite the region’s harsh climate, it is a “magical” place, he says. The area is part of the Tibetan plateau and is next to Tibet and Kashmir; there is chaos all around, but the place itself is peaceful, he says.

Looks can sometimes be deceiving. One must plan ahead, read the guidebooks, and talk to others about the proposed route, Beecroft says. Danger can be just around the corner, literally. Once, for example, during a kayaking trip on a river in Turkey, a huge rockfall preceded his group’s arrival to a spot on the river. The rockfall created new rapids, and there were “horrible, nasty rocks” all around. Beecroft and his friends were faced with an “obligatory passage” because there was nowhere else to go.

There have been other misadventures but none that were life-threatening. In 1991, he was on a kayaking trip to Kyrgyzstan just in time to experience the chaos of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. “You could not find gas or transport, and people were standing up on a 5-hour flight from Tashkent to Moscow”, he says; “then, we had to unload the plane ourselves. One guy got onto the flight by bartering a Swiss Army knife with the pilot.” With “lots of patience and a bit of baksheesh”, Beecroft got back home.

High altitudes can also present a problem during these kayaking trips, in that many of

the rivers are entered at elevations as high as 4000 m (about 13,000 ft). Typically, Beecroft arrives a day or so early so he can acclimate and thus avoid acute mountain sickness. He has kayaked in the Sun Kosi, a river in Nepal that originates in the world’s highest mountain range, the Himalayas. The Sun Kosi has challenging rapids with names like Meat Grinder, High Anxiety, and Dead Man’s Eddy, according to kayaking travel sites. Downstream, the river is joined by the Dudh Kosi, a river that begins near the base of Mt. Everest and whose perils were captured in a film called “First Descent of Dudh Kosi—Relentless River of Everest”.

The experiences over time pay off, and one learns from them, Beecroft says. “You learn to read the signs that show you the best and safest line down the river.” There have been times, though, when he has capsized and has saved himself with an adept “Eskimo roll” to right himself and the kayak.

Beecroft says he has not brushed up against other hazards, such as dangerous animals or life-threatening storms. Usually, on the large rivers, a short downpour doesn’t change the level of the river much. And, although his excursions involve bivouacking along the river and he has slept on beaches inhabited by spiders and snakes, he has never had a threatening encounter with one. For kayakers who venture into Africa, though, it’s a different story, he said; hippos and crocodiles can pose real danger. The closest he’s come to such encounters was finding bear tracks on a sandy beach.

Thus far, Beecroft’s kayaking excursions have taken him all over Europe and to the United States, Canada, Turkey, Russia, Nepal, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and India. “It does make a very nice contrast with editorial work”, he says.

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