

THE BALANCING ACT

Two Case Stories

Supervisor/Student Experience of Postgraduate Research

Mary (the student): From flying high to plumbing the depths
John (her supervisor): She just doesn't have what it takes...

Mary: From flying high to plumbing the depths

My Honours year was fantastic, I enjoyed every minute of it. It was like a drug, I couldn't get enough; I worked seven days a week, all hours. Finally I had found something that captured my imagination and the freedom to explore things I wanted: no more facts learning followed by regurgitation. What a buzz.

When I was offered the opportunity to do a PhD I jumped at it. Having gained a First Class Honours I was even going to be paid for the pleasure of researching! And to top it all off, my Honours supervisor, with whom I had a great relationship, agreed to be my supervisor again. He suggested my thesis should be in a related area to my Honours work. Who could want for more?

So off I rushed to the literature to find a juicy problem I could get my teeth into. My supervisor suggested looking at a species of spineless, short-snouted bloodsucking echidnas. As next to nothing was known about these animals I felt I could make a real contribution. The fact that these animals had only been sighted in remote, dense bushland was not an insurmountable problem. And so the long saga began.

I arranged with my supervisor that I would go bush, set up a base camp and start trapping and tagging my study population. I had a few initial teething problems but that was to be expected. Firstly, my animals only lived in areas heavily populated with purple-bellied, green snakes, and for the first four weeks these were all I saw. No problem, I overcame my initial fear of snakes, always travelled with a long stick and wore heavy trousers. When finally I encountered an echidna it was a blood bath. It may have been spineless but its teeth were like razors. I needed stitches. I bound up my gashes and had to walk out six km to my vehicle and drive for 5 hours to the nearest medical centre. Even this was not sufficient to put me off. I arranged for additional help with trapping and tagging. My supervisor was very sympathetic, he provided additional protective clothing and allowed me to recruit additional people to help. As the only time other students had free was weekends, we agreed to have five people come up each weekend for a total of six weeks. The students would be given a small allowance for the pleasure of fresh air and free food. However, one experience was enough and word was out that spineless, short-snouted, bloodsucking echidnas are to be avoided at all costs. What to do? It was impossible to go it alone and I had no help. I went back to my supervisor and explained the situation. We agreed that the situation was impossible and I needed another topic.

"How about researching the sea-going behaviour of the long-spined, fish-eating echidnas of Heartbreak Island?" my supervisor suggested. Great I thought, sun, sea and surf, what more could a girl want (although I would have to be careful that the new scare tissue on my legs and hand didn't get sun burnt). I read what little was known about the species and looking forward with anticipation to living on Heartbreak with other researchers who were also working on the same species. How was I to know that I would get seasick every time I went out in the boat?

By this time my supervisor was getting a little short with me. I think he thought I should have managed some how. But it was impossible. I had lost 5 kg in weight in the first three weeks I was so sick. A simple calculation will tell you that, if data collection was to take 12 months, by the end of it I would have to run around in the shower to get wet I'd be so thin.

After more discussion we finally agreed that the tree-climbing echidnas of Arnham Land were the answer. A large expedition was mounted, I learnt how to fire a gun and how to handle a boat on inland waters (no waves, hoorah). I was ready to tackle anything. Well, almost anything. I hadn't realised that tree-climbing echidnas live in trees surrounded by water that was infested by crocodiles, water python and King cobras. I thought the light arms training was in case of emergencies, not everyday survival. No way was I going to stay in an insect-ridden, reptile-infested hole to trap and tag a few tree-climbing echidnas!

What an irresponsible supervisor? How could he do that to me? I know I had a few problems with the first projects, none of which were my own fault I might add, but to send me to such conditions..... And to top it all off he didn't understand why I was so upset with the situation. Now he is just being bloody minded. I can't get to talk to him about another topic; he is avoiding me. I think he just wants me to go away, chuck it all in and leave. I've become a problem for him. I don't know what to do.

I had such high hopes, I can't believe it has come to this. (Echidnas are not my favourite topic at the moment.)

The species have been changed to protect the innocent.

John: She just doesn't have what it takes.

Mary was our first Honours student. Being our first student everyone wanted her to do well. We all bent over backwards to help her. Tom helped her with data collection, Mark assisted with the statistical analysis and Peter was able to advise on data presentation. And she did well, very well indeed.

I now know that we gave her too much help. She expected a PhD would be more of the same. It's not, you have to be much more independent, more resourceful and more persevering. Let me tell you what happened.

She was given a project to look at the population dynamics of the spineless, short-snouted, bloodsucking echidna. Now these animals are very rare and only inhabit dense, remote bushland. To give her her dues, she researched what was known at the time and carefully planned her trip to trap and tag the animals. But she somehow managed to get badly bitten by the first animal she managed to catch. She did the correct thing and tried to anticipate how to handle wild animals like these but she said she couldn't manage alone. So I agreed to fund a number of students to go out each weekend and help her with the trapping program. But she didn't train the assistants properly, so a number of them got bitten too. Word got around and no one was willing to go out and help despite being paid. The project was obviously not going to work, so I decided to get her to work with Bill on Heartbreak Island.

Bill is a colleague of mine who has previously done some collaborative work with me on another species of echidna. He is now working on the long-spined, fish-eating echidna. I called in a favour and asked him if he would oversee Mary working on the sea-going behaviour of these creatures. He agreed. But would you believe it, she gave up because she initially got a bit seasick. She didn't even remain long enough to get over it. All sailors get sick initially but they get over it given enough time.

When she asked me for a third project I was not going to give her one that might damage my relations with other colleagues, so I decided to have her work on the tree-climbing echidnas of Arnham Land. These are really shy animals that have a quiet disposition ideal for Mary, or so I thought. She refused to stay. Now her excuse was that there were crocodiles in the water near the trees she had to observe. Crocodiles won't hurt you if you don't do anything silly, like swim in the water or go near a nesting mother. It's perfectly safe. Anyway, she was given gun training in the case of a real emergency. All the waters of Arnham Land have crocodiles, that's part of its charm. What did she expect?

If she thought she couldn't hack it she should not have agreed to go. Have you any idea of how much time and money this student has cost me with no results to show for it? And now she wants me to find her another project. No way.

She just doesn't have what it takes to be a researcher out in the real world. If she is anything to go on, I don't think women should be allowed to do field work. I'm sorry I agreed to take her on as a PhD student. She lacks independence, is frightened of her own shadow and needs to find another career. This one is obviously not for her. From now on Honours students will be given less help, that way we will know they have the skills to survive a PhD.