

The Business of Butterflies

Joris Brinckerhoff '82

Few people can describe the place they live and work in as a "tropical paradise"; the term seems most at home among the hackneyed phrases that fill the glossy pages of travel magazines. For Joris Brinckerhoff, a graduate of the Whittemore School of Business and Economics, the cliché is almost unavoidable when he discusses his own backyard—a butterfly farm set in the lush countryside of Costa Rica. "It's true we live in a tropical paradise where it's 76 degrees year around, in an armyless, politically stable country. We have thousands of butterflies in our backyard, and mangos, oranges, and avocados for the picking," he says.

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Brinckerhoff, a native of Exeter, N.H., who studied economics and political science at UNH, owns and operates the second largest butterfly export company in the world, a business which each year attracts close to 34,000 visitors from around the world. La Finca de Mariposas, or The Butterfly Farm, supplies exotic species for use in butterfly exhibitions in Europe and the United States, catering to an increasingly popular niche of the ecotourism trade.

While working as a Peace Corps volunteer in rural Costa Rica in 1983, Brinckerhoff met a man who bred butterflies as a hobby. The man told him about the growing international phenomenon of butterfly houses—enclosed sanctuaries for living butterflies to which people come to view some of the most beautiful and rare species. The idea of butterfly farming appealed to Brinckerhoff at once as the perfect environmentally benign industry to begin in Costa Rica, a country with a solid record of preserving its stunning biodiversity and a strong commitment to developing alternatives to its traditional but non-indigenous exports of coffee, sugar, and bananas.

The business of butterflies, Brinckerhoff erroneously concluded, would require only a small initial investment and involve the use of fairly simple technology. He thought the most daunting obstacles would be his lack of Costa Rican resident status, which was needed to live there; export taxes on insects that far exceeded their potential selling price; and his profound dearth of knowledge about every aspect of butterfly breeding.

"WSBE (the Whittemore School of Business and Economics) did little to prepare me for my work with lepidoptera. I couldn't distinguish a male butterfly from a female," he admits. "Butterfly host plant relationships were a mystery. Breeding methodologies were completely unknown to me. So, too, were viruses, bacteria, parasitic wasps and flies, and ants. There were no books on tropical butterfly farming, and the few people who bred butterflies as a hobby were highly secretive."

Yet after a few months of contempla-

tion, Brinckerhoff chose to stay in Central America beyond the expiration of his Peace Corps contract to explore further the feasibility of this intriguing potential business.

Building a Business

For more than two years, Brinckerhoff observed the life cycles and habits of butterflies in rainforests throughout Costa Rica and collected a number of species to study in breeding facilities that he built for himself. He learned that the country's tropical climate and lush plant life sustained a great variety of gorgeous species of insects, some of which are rare.

To obtain Costa Rican residency, Brinckerhoff opted for a bolder, more expeditious route than the standard channels of government bureaucracy. He attended the annual Peace Corps conference at which the country's president was to be the keynote speaker, and during the question and answer period, with the U.S. ambassador, the press, and 200 colleagues in attendance, Brinckerhoff introduced himself and his ambitious plan. He concluded by mentioning his need to acquire residency, emphasizing that he would greatly appreciate the president's signature on a previously prepared letter of recommendation to the immigration authorities.

"As it was impossible for even the president to decline my request in such a public setting, he signed my letter and I acquired my residency virtually by presidential decree," Brinckerhoff says.

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The last hurdle of high national export taxes was much more difficult to clear. The law imposed a \$2.00 tax on every wildlife specimen exported from Costa Rica, making it impossible to sell butterflies for the current market rate of \$2.00 to \$4.50 each. Brinckerhoff had pleaded his case to various government officials for more than a year, when one day he was abruptly ushered into the country's wildlife department office.

"In five minutes their lawyer decreed that a unit of butterflies would henceforth be defined as a box of 50 butterflies," Brinckerhoff says. "With the export tax set at four cents per specimen, I was suddenly in business."

In 1985, Brinckerhoff and his new Portuguese wife, Maria Sabido, bought a small farm at the edge of a rainforest and close to San Jose and an airport, an ideal location for their burgeoning business.

They planted thousands of nectar and larval food plants and allowed most of the land to revert to forest, creating a small Garden of Eden for butterflies to live and breed in.

By the time they began op-



Joris Brinckerhoff examines a butterfly that he caught in the rainforest near his farm in Santa Ana, Costa Rica. After working in the country as a Peace Corps volunteer, Brinckerhoff stayed on to start his own business—The Butterfly Farm, which has become a world supplier of butterflies and one of Costa Rica's major tourist attractions.

erations in 1986, their potential market was beginning to explode with the opening of dozens of new butterfly houses in Europe and North America.

The Allure of the Butterfly

No other insect can compete with the butterfly's secure place in the human heart. From its magical transformation from a creeping caterpillar to lovely winged creature, to its graceful, yet whimsical patterns of flight, the butterfly seems to speak to deeply rooted human longing for beauty and freedom. Sadly, the butterfly also seems to symbolize the fragile nature of these ideals; most species live no more than three to four weeks.

While Brinckerhoff jokes that the "built-in obsolescence factor" of his "product" would shame even some American industrialists, timing is crucial in his business. At The Butterfly Farm, some 60 different species of butterflies are reared in large, screened structures filled with tropical plants. The butterflies lay their eggs on their host plants, which are then collected and stored until they hatch into larvae, or caterpillars. At this stage, the creatures live to eat, feasting on one species of plant for one to three months before moving on to the chrysalis, or pupae, stage, when they will undergo an amazing metamorphosis.

This is the critical point at which the cocoons are carefully packaged, 40 to 100 per box, to be sent via air freight to various destinations around the world. If all goes well, the butterflies are nearly ready to emerge from their cocoons upon arrival.

Today The Butterfly Farm exports more than 120,000 live butterflies each year to exhibitions around Europe, the

United States and Canada. These tiny emissaries of the rainforest, many belonging to rapidly disappearing species, serve a higher function than merely entertaining people: they remind the world of the stunning beauty that is born and nurtured in its rainforests.

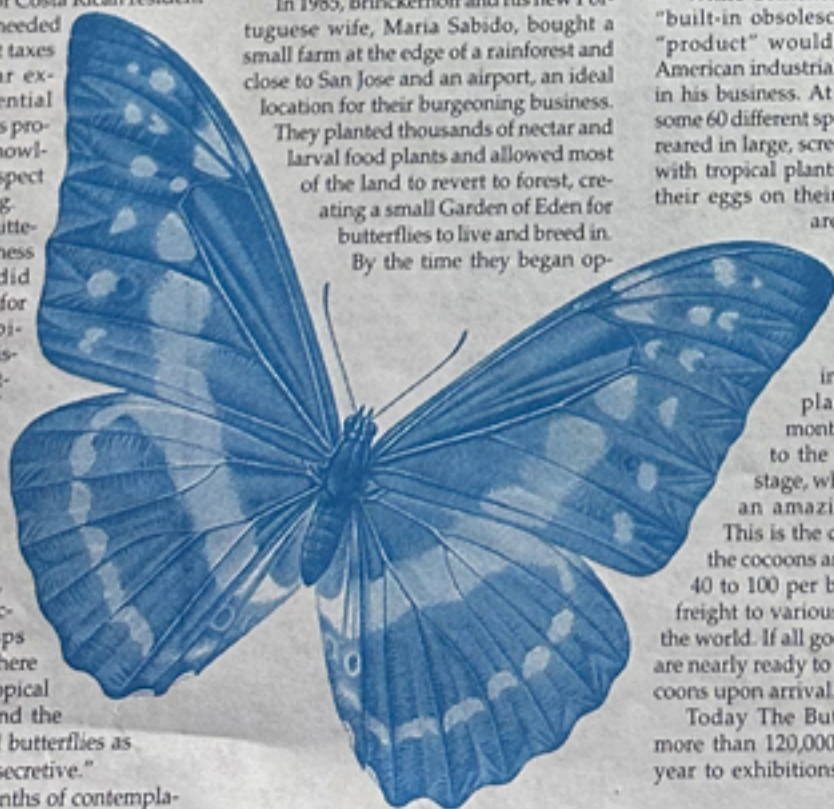
Hosts to 34,000 House Guests

The world's first butterfly exhibitor, a wealthy resident of a small island off the coast of England, underestimated the allure of the butterfly. In his quest for a large tax write-off in 1977, he purchased an empty greenhouse, cranked up the heat inside and stocked it with tropical plants and thousands of live Asian butterflies. He then hung a sign on the door stating "Butterfly Exhibit," and sat back in the hope of losing several thousands of dollars that year. Instead, tourists thronged the island and the poor man made a killing. Within a few years, butterfly exhibits began to appear in Europe and other parts of the world.

With this in mind, Brinckerhoff and Sabido opened their business to the public in 1990, and the farm quickly turned into one of Costa Rica's premier tourist attractions. Visitors, from local schoolchildren to international tour groups, take two-hour guided tours in which they learn about the natural history of butterflies and the farm's breeding operation. Last year some 34,000 "house guests," as Brinckerhoff calls them, dropped in for a visit.

After nearly a decade in business, does The Butterfly Farm still seem like a tropical paradise? "In many respects, we are extraordinarily fortunate," Brinckerhoff confesses. "Our careers are fascinating, satisfying, and multifaceted. But without time for anything beyond the business for ten years now, including friends, family and especially ourselves, the personal cost has been high. That indeed someday our lives will be idyllic—we dream."

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It all began in New Hampshire

Butterflies, continued from page 11

What made Joris Brinckerhoff, who had never been a serious student of entomology, biology, or agriculture, believe he could succeed as a butterfly farmer in

Central America? Part of the answer, he explains, stems from his childhood experiences in the community of Phillips Exeter Academy, the prestigious New

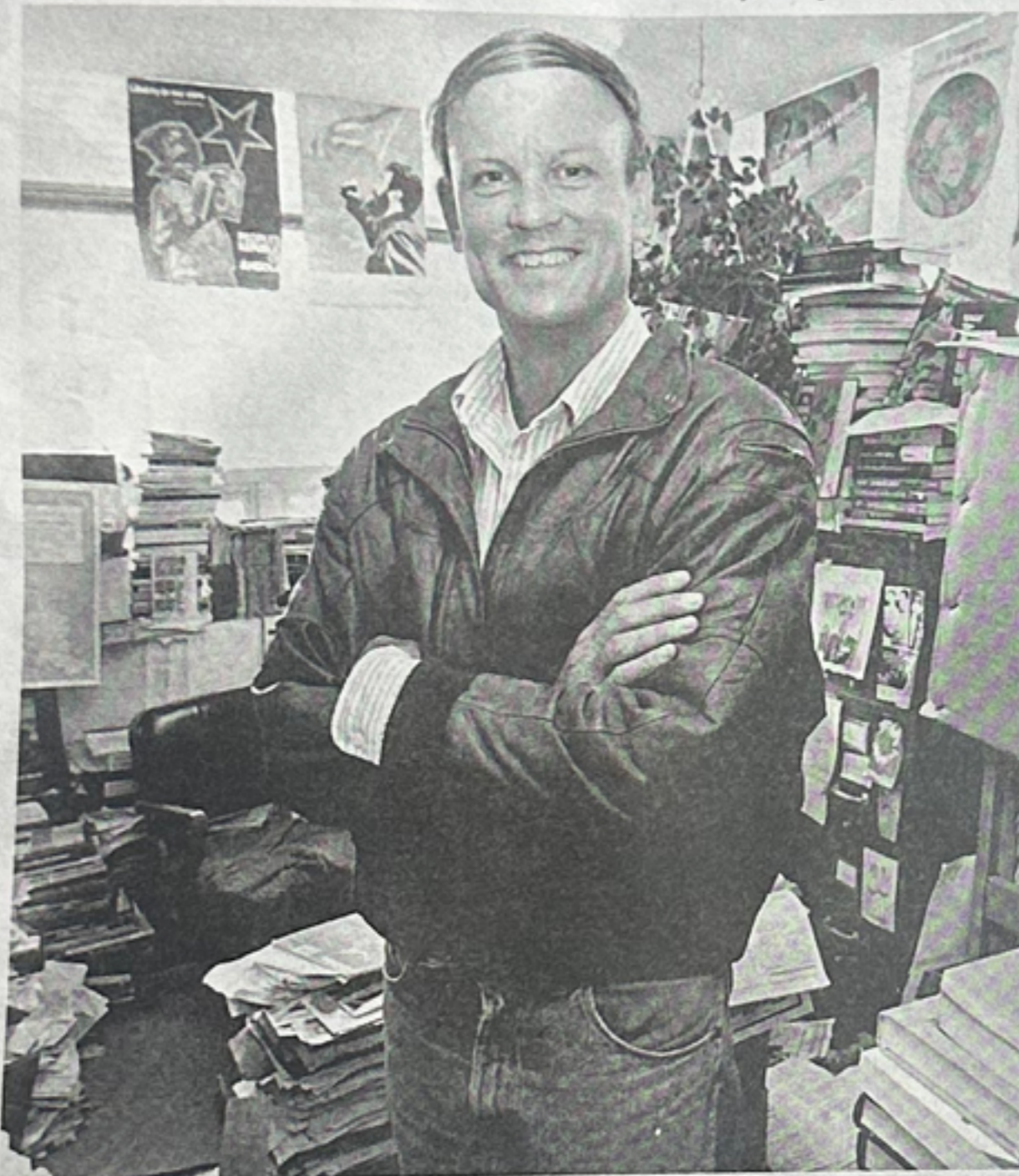


photo by Gary Samson

Professor Marc Herold is both a mentor and friend of Joris Brinckerhoff.

Hampshire preparatory school where his father was a science teacher. "It was a stimulating experience. One is surrounded by people who by one measure or another are extraordinary. Some of the qualities which were impressed on me—arduous work, personal integrity, openness to ideas, a spirit for interesting travel, and a willingness to take risks—have served me well," he explains.

Those early influences also ignited in him a great sense of curiosity about the world and a certain fearlessness toward taking on challenges. As a teenager, he joined his father and a group of friends in crossing the Sahara Desert twice in one summer. His responsibility, which he says he needed to "justify his presence as a 19-year-old green hand," was to collect spiders and scorpions for the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology. "From that experience inevitably grew an interest in and appreciation for bugs," he notes.

As a UNH sophomore, Brinckerhoff took a yearlong hiatus to travel, work and explore the world. Among other endeavors, he dug ditches for a gas company in Australia, acted as a construction supervisor on the Thai and Cambodian border for the United Nation's High Commission for Refugees and CARE, and visited World Bank projects in Nepal.

When he returned to UNH to complete his studies, Brinckerhoff found a strong advocate of unconventional ways of learning in WSBE professor Marc Herold, who became both his mentor and friend. Herold, also a person with little fear of traditional boundaries, offers courses at UNH that range from Third-World Women and Economic Development, to Theories of Third-World Social Revolutions, to Post-Modernism. "Problems and understandings cut across disciplines,"

Herold points out. "There seems to be an idea among some students that what you major in will determine your future. That's not the case, in my view.

"What matters is who you are, how you think, and how creative you can be," he continues. "Specialization might come later. I'd prefer people who can think critically and recognize the constructed ways of seeing and being from which we claim to 'understand'."

Professor Herold encouraged Brinckerhoff, and scores of other students, to travel and explore third-world nations as a way of escaping what he describes as our "cultural tunnel vision." Past students of his have taken a year to wander through China, Tibet, and India; have served in the Peace Corps in Benin, Paraguay, the Dominican Republic, and beyond; have taught elementary literacy and primary health in the Amazonian hinterland of Venezuela; and have volunteered to work on a pig farm in Zimbabwe. "Europe is so much like us," Herold concludes. "There are still parts of the third world that are not commodity based, where there is a much different conception of life, relations, and values. It allows students to recognize that our position in the U.S. offers a very limited perception, and only particular truths."

Perhaps all of these experiences played a part in the choices Brinckerhoff has made in his life, but who can say what led him to have faith in the simple beauty of butterflies.

—Kimberly Swick Slover

Those interested in visiting The Butterfly Farm may write for more information to: The Butterfly Farm S.A., 323-6150 Santa Ana, Costa Rica.