

# Living beyond the edge

## Tale of an intentional castaway

by John McCrank  
NEWS STAFF

When he talks about his year of self-imposed isolation on a desolate Chilean island, UBC PhD candidate Bob Kull has a knack for understatement. "This hasn't been easy. It's not the path for somebody who is looking for the easy way through," he says.

A former truck driver, logger and then scuba instructor in the Caribbean, Kull entered into academia rather late in life.

"When I was 40, I wiped out in the Caribbean on my motorcycle and had part of my leg amputated and couldn't continue the things that I had been doing, so I decided to go to school," says Kull about his decision to enroll at McGill University in biology and psychology.

After completing his undergraduate degree, Kull headed into Northern Quebec for a few months to do a solitary retreat, a practice that he has been doing "for years and years and years," and while there, he experienced what he calls "a major shift."

"I felt myself come back alive. I realised that I had become an empty shell at McGill. It was all theories and hypotheses, academic life had no relation to my real life," says Kull, who then went traveling through South America.

When he saw the rugged Chilean coast, he thought that he might have found the perfect place to conduct the year-long retreat that he had been planning in the back of his mind. He wanted it to merge real experience with academic life. After a barrage of faxes and phone calls, the experiment was set up and Kull found himself back in Canada at UBC, putting together an advisory committee for his PhD and planning his voyage.

Kull's home base at UBC is in the Forestry building, but his dissertation is in interdisciplinary studies, encompassing biology, psychology, philosophy, spirituality, education and conservation. One of the members of his committee is Carl Leggo, a professor of language and literacy education, who calls Kull's research "extraordinarily fascinating and significant."

"Bob's dissertation will raise many intriguing questions about ecology, solitude, community, urban living, biology, spirituality and the complex workings of the heart," says Leggo, who joined Kull's supervisory committee because of his focus on narrative and poetic writing.

Kull didn't go into the project with a specific hypothesis, but said instead that "what I'm going to do is make a commitment to

spend a year in solitude and over and over—just like in a meditation retreat—come back into the present moment and experience mindfully what's going on."

"And one day I mentioned mindfulness [to Leggo] and he jumped on it and said 'That tradition has been around for thousands of years.' It's an exploratory, well-recognised methodology, mindfulness." Together with writing a journal, it became a big part of Kull's project.

To fund his work, Kull applied for and received a National Science and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) grant as well as several small scholarships and a grant from UBC; he also took student loans and worked as a teaching assistant before having the Chilean Navy drop him off on the small coastal island. Kull was there from February 2001 to February 2002.

"[T]he coast there is very similar to the West Coast of BC," says Kull, "the difference being that there is just no one there." It is separated from society by the natural barrier of the Andean Mountains and thousands of other uninhabited islands. Another difference is that it rains more (three to six metres a year), and the wind is more fierce and constant.

"The wind was a really strong presence and it became my enemy," relates Kull. "I felt that the wind was out to get me—it flipped my boat and [flooded] both of my motors in salt water. And there were times that I would be in my cabin and it would feel like the whole island was shaking."

Eventually, Kull came to accept the wind, and at one point, "watching the condors and the seagulls just grooving on the wind," Kull got the idea to build a kite, which he attached to the end of his fishing rod.

"It would disappear into the clouds and I would be controlling it with my rod, and I was literally fishing for the wind...The wind was a major teacher in surrendering."

Another of his teachers and his only companion, was an epileptic kitten named Cat (because there was only one) which the Chilean Parks Board had recommended he take to test for toxic shellfish. However, he quickly became attached to Cat and only fed him the same fish that he ate himself.

Kull said that what he learned from Cat was that "[he is] just a piece of the world and Cat is just a piece of the world." In other words, he couldn't control Cat and he was not responsible for Cat being Cat—this is where Kull delved into Buddhist philosophy.

"I spent time everyday in meditation, listening to the sounds of the water and little by little, things got simpler. And I started to recognise the basic Buddhist teachings of what causes our grief—it's desires...wanting things to be different than they are, and that materialism gets into the spirit."

"And of course, Cat had his own agenda—you know, cats don't believe that we're in charge," he added.

Sadly, Cat—who went home with a friend of Kull's—disappeared three weeks after the end of Kull's isolation. A veterinarian friend



**LOOKING INSIDE:** After a year on a Chilean island with only an epileptic cat for company, Bob Kull has some interesting views on life. NIC FENSOM PHOTO

of Kull's said Cat probably died of natural causes, owing to the fact that epileptic cats don't live very long.

The rigours of island life took their toll on Kull, who tore both of the rotator cuffs in his shoulders when he slipped on some rocks and, at another time, had to pull one of his own teeth when it became abscessed. Still, the opportunity for self-analysis and introspection that the experience of solitude enabled led to periods of enlightenment and equanimity that he had never before experienced.

The next challenge for Kull was coming back to society.

"After I was on the island a year, my friend Patty Kuchinsky came, and she stayed on the island for a month so that I could have somebody that I could reintegrate with before I went back to society," Kuchinsky told him two

things upon arrival, that a close mutual friend had died, and that the World Trade Centre had been attacked.

Currently, Kull is working on his dissertation, and giving slide show presentations. Anybody interested in having Kull give a slide show presentation on his trip can contact him at bobkull@exchange.ubc.ca.

Photos of his journey can be viewed at [www.forestry.ubc.ca/portal/bobkull](http://www.forestry.ubc.ca/portal/bobkull).

Kull said he's still not quite sure how to put the experience he had on the island in two words:

"I'm reading [my] journals now, and I'm in the place now where I'm questioning the depression and the darkness and I recognise that I need to include that into the psyche...it [the questioning] never that's complete—it's the job of a lifetime." ♦