

Sharing a Love for the Environment: The Impact of an Endowed Fellowship

BY MARNIE HAMMAR

When Bertram and Barbara Cohn were looking for a way to make a difference in the environment, they thought of Harvard. More specifically, they thought of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.

In the fall of 1997, Peder Anker of Norway was beginning his third year of a PhD program in the history of science. It was a critical time for Anker; he was at a turning point in his research. But in the back of his mind he had concerns about funding. "As an international student, I knew I would not qualify for certain kinds of funding," Anker says. "But my academic interests were always my first priority, which meant that choosing the best department took precedence. When I arrived in Cambridge, I had funding only for two years."

Anker began his third year with no clearly defined sources of support. "I thought I would need to teach, which is something I really enjoy doing," he says. "But I was concerned about falling behind on my dissertation, especially at a time when I was making so much progress." As Anker weighed his options, his mentor Everett Mendelsohn, a professor of the history of science, suggested applying for a new Harvard fellowship: the Bertram and Barbara Cohn Fund for Environmental Studies.

The Cohns have a record of philanthropy, including the establishment of the Cohn Institute for History and Philosophy of Science at Tel Aviv University. They created the Harvard fellowship to make a positive impact closer to home. "I suppose I've always been interested in the environment, going back to the age of eight when my father and I would hike through the woods in New Jersey," says Bert Cohn, AB '47. "Over the years, my interest has heightened. No matter where you turn, there is an encroaching environmental problem."

Cohn approached Harvard in search of a way to make a deeper impact on the environment, while also helping graduate students.



"The Cohns' grant was crucial to my success," says GSAS alumnus Peder Anker. On right, Barbara and Bertram Cohn.

"Harvard is a reservoir of bright people," says Cohn. "My hope was that my contributions would make a difference in the lives of numerous scholars."

Choosing to establish the fellowship with GSAS was easy. "At the graduate level, students are making a commitment to a particular area of interest," Cohn says. "And their future colleagues, the current experts in the field, are selecting them." Cohn believed that his desire to make a difference would match GSAS students' drive to do the same.

The Cohns' fellowship came just in time for Anker. "When I got this grant, it was the exact amount I needed to maintain my momentum and move my dissertation through extremely critical stages," Anker says. "The grant was crucial to my success."

It was also a motivating force. "Receiving the fellowship was a vote of confidence," Anker says. "I felt validated as a scholar. The award said that my research and my efforts were worthy of funding. I've always wanted to 'save the environment.' I figured that the best thing I could do is to question and study its history. Having support from the Cohns made all the difference."

According to Mendelsohn, there was no doubt Anker was a deserving recipient. "Peder is one of those students who, when I would assign a book, would come back having read three," he says. "I've seen him participate

in panel discussions where, once he started to speak, the audience just woke up. I co-taught a Core course with him one term and, on the student evaluations, it was clear they enjoyed and embraced his enthusiasm. His excitement is contagious."

In 2001, Anker returned to Norway, where he finished the book that began as his Harvard dissertation, *Imperial Ecology: Environmental Order in the British Empire, 1895-1945* (Harvard University Press). The book began as a look into the history of ecological science, but Anker says, "as I conducted my research, the topic began to take on a life of its own, overlapping into culture and politics, and became a combination of nature, knowledge, and society." Today, Anker splits his time between lecturing on the international circuit and researching a new book about the history of ecological architecture.

Cohn says he is pleased Anker was the fellowship's first recipient. "Something Peder said to me helped me to put our mutual commitment to the environment in perspective," says Cohn. "He summed it up so simply, saying that, although our environmental challenges are much too large for one person or one group, with hundreds of people working in simple ways, we will make a difference. This fellowship is my simple way, and I look forward to being able to touch the lives of more students, to energize them to continue the fight." ■

• • •

Alumni seeking information on endowed fellowships and other major gifts for the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences are asked to contact Fred Levine at 1-800-VERITAS or at fred_levine@harvard.edu.

Marnie Hammar is assistant director of communications with the Office of Alumni Affairs and Development.