But, then, Alex Dehgan is not a typical tropical biologist.
This lawyer-turned-scientist-turned-policy maker currently works
as a senior scientist and policy adviser for the Secretary of State and
for the administrator of the U.S. Agency for International
Development.
His title brings with it a complicated charge: to develop science
diplomacy initiatives for the Islamic world and policies on how to
integrate science into U.S. foreign assistance programs. More simply
put, to support scientific endeavors throughout the Islamic world.
America leads the world in science, engineering and technology,
and science is highly regarded throughout Islamic nations, Dehgan
said. “The Islamic world was a cradle of science once: Islamic
medicine and science led the world for centuries while Europe
stagnated in the Dark Ages,” he said. “Science provides common
language and values that cut across most religions and culture.
We can work to support science and facilitate diplomacy
simultaneously.”
To do this, Dehgan looks strategically at how science can help
achieve Washington’s diplomatic goals by incorporating science and
technology into foreign assistance and development programs for
Islamic nations.
“The focus of our foreign assistance is building economies,
transforming agriculture and solving global health problems, as
well as democracy building and supporting the rule of law,” he said.
“Science and technology have a role to play in all of these.”
For example, he said climate change “represents a fundamental
threat to the national security of the United States in the coming
century” because of its potential to affect and undermine many
foreign-assistance goals.
To focus on this threat within the Islamic world, Dehgan hopes
to create a new organization, comprised of scientists, conservationists
and international development experts. The group would focus
on helping countries (failed and failing states) adapt to climate
change and address environmental degradation by building
scientific capacity to manage environmental problems and by
training local scientists and officials to adapt to future environmen-
tal changes.
A ROAD LESS TRAVELED

The words “uniquely qualified” are bandied about with ease in Washington. In Dehgan’s case, they actually seem true. The 38-year-old Iranian moved to the United States when he was 2. He earned his undergraduate degree at Duke University with a dual major in zoology and political science, glibly claiming “either way, I figured I was dealing with animal behavior.”

He opted to follow political science first, studying law at the University of California. After graduating from Hastings College of the Law in 1993, Dehgan became a member of the California Bar and the Bar of the U.S. Court of International Trade, and clerked for the chief judge of the U.S. Court of International Trade.

That’s when his career turned back to science: Dehgan earned a master’s degree and a doctorate in evolutionary biology at the University of Chicago in 2003.

As part of his doctoral research, Dehgan directed the Ranomafana Fragments Project, spending two and half years in a tent in the southeastern rainforests of Madagascar. His research focused on the role of behavioral plasticity—why certain animals go extinct while others are able to survive changes in their habitats. More specifically, he studied the effects of tropical rainforest decline on 12 species of lemurs.

After graduating from Chicago, Dehgan received a diplomacy fellowship from the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He worked for the State Department to support scientific, environmental and legal aspects of U.S. policy in the Near East. In 2004, the State Department sent Dehgan to Baghdad to work with the Coalition Provisional Authority to help rebuild Iraq’s once-vital science and engineering culture. To help stabilize the nation and keep scientists from going to work for hostile forces, Dehgan recruited Saddam Hussein’s former weapons scientists for civilian work.

Though he lived in the Green Zone, his work required him to travel throughout the city almost daily, which meant his time in Iraq was anything but calm: Dehgan narrowly avoided injury from a blast that destroyed many vehicles outside the Green Zone; was frequently being threatened by people clutching AK47s; and used his flak jacket as a blanket as he warily fell asleep in his quarters.

Even as he left, “my plane and the airport came under fire,” Dehgan said in 2005. “The stress never stopped until I returned home—and even then, it took months before I could relax.”

Dehgan’s work in Iraq didn’t go unnoticed. He received recognition from the departments of State and Defense with a Superior Honor Award and a Letter of Commendation, respectively.

After returning to the States, Dehgan was posted in Washington as an adviser to the Secretary of State’s policy planning staff, working on Israel/Palestine, Syria/Lebanon and Western Sahara conflicts. But this scientist missed biology. So when the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) offered him a field job, he took it, even though it meant returning to a war zone. This time, Afghanistan.

“It was a challenge,” Dehgan said. “But it was an opportunity to work on conservation in a country where nothing had ever been done.
on conservation—no maps, no parks, minimal laws. The idea of being able to transition from what I was working on, as well as my prior experience, and then to bring in my scientific training was very intriguing to me.”

Dehgan became the country director for the WCS’s Biodiversity Conservation Program. With a $6.9 million grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development and a staff that grew from two to 75, Dehgan’s projects in Afghanistan were as diverse as his background: The WCS conducted baseline surveys of the country’s wildlife populations; wrote legislation for Afghan environmental policies; began a science-based program in training and capacity-building; and helped the Afghan government build its national park system, curtail illegal wildlife trade and deforestation, and train communities to manage their natural resources.

“Afghan people are very closely tied to their land,” Dehgan said, noting that 80 percent of Afghans are dependent on natural resources. “Their entire wealth, their entire survival in a very harsh part of the world is livestock and the few crops they grow to be able to feed that livestock.”

When those natural resources are depleted, Afghans look elsewhere to survive, he said, adding that “the Taliban pays better wages than the Afghan national army.”

“Security is much more than just buying guns,” he said. “It’s helping people to survive in the place that they’re in. This is the most fundamental aspect of security. If those natural resources are declining, you’re going to have a more serious problem no matter how many guns you buy.”

Dehgan experienced those security problems firsthand. “When you’re in Kabul, you just don’t flock anywhere,” he said, describing the risks of kidnapping, bombings and other types of attacks. “You have to be very aware of your surroundings, which means you can’t do a lot of things that you may take for granted here.”

Each staff member in Dehgan’s Afghan team was trained in advanced lifesaving techniques and in how to read mine maps and to work around landmines. Each field team was tracked via satellite phone and GPS, and there was a 24-hour evacuation plan no matter where they were in the country. And although each of the cars had $30,000 worth of upgrades, the drivers would flip a coin to determine which route to take traveling in Kabul. “If you can randomize it, you’re going to minimize your chances of becoming a target,” Dehgan said. Most importantly, “we remembered that we were guests of the community, and people respected us for it.”

Although his office was in Kabul, Dehgan and his staff conducted their field work mainly in three areas: the Wakhan, Nuristan and Band-E Amir regions.

The far-reaching Wakhan, spared the country’s swelling violence, was a comparatively safe haven for travelers. But since the Wakhan is mostly roadless, each team member would spend a week on the back of a yak—a docile animal, Dehgan said—to get to the field site. “That one was a new one for me,” he admitted.

Nuristan, made famous by Eric Newby’s A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush, is lush with deciduous and coniferous forests and mountains. Unfortunately, Dehgan didn’t get to travel in that area since it is home to the Taliban. Instead, he trained Afghans from that region to survey its wildlife.

The third area, Band-E Amir, west of Kabul, is home to seven travertine lakes. Dehgan was working to build that area into a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage Site. This is one of many parks the WCS is working to establish throughout the country to develop tourism.

Thirty years ago, tourism was the No. 2 source of income for Afghanistan. With 18,000-foot mountains that have never been climbed and a diverse wildlife that includes markhor, Marco Polo sheep, snow leopards, urials and Asiatic black bears, the country, Dehgan said, can once again become a popular place for eco-tourism.

But Afghanistan’s rich wildlife also attracts a flourishing endangered species trade, part of which is supported by expatriates, U.S. and foreign military personnel and development organizations. “These people were doing good things going out there, but then buying things like snow leopard furs and driving the animals extinct,” Dehgan said. He fought back with a targeted advertising campaign, and he also worked with U.S. military police and officials since soldiers were unknowingly not only violating military regulations, but also breaking U.S. and Afghan laws.

But the illegal wildlife trade wasn’t contained inside the borders of Afghanistan. According to Dehgan, small groups of Arabs and other foreigners would fly into the country on rented 737s and camp in the desert to hunt endangered birds—sometimes using the rare Saker falcon to hunt other endangered birds, like the Houbara bustard. Dehgan recalled a video he received that showed five men on a 737 with every row filled with the endangered animals.

“You wonder how they can do this in the Kandahar and Hellman provinces, which are some of the most dangerous places in the world,” he said. “They do it by supporting the insurgencies.”

Another challenge was recruiting staff, particularly women. “You just can’t go out and hire someone,” he said, “not just because there’s only an 11 percent literacy rate among women, but there’s the additional problem of a very conservative social environment where the husbands won’t let the women out.”
Most of the staff in Kabul were Afghans. He recruited many scientists, including some who worked in the country 30 years ago and have returned to Afghanistan to work. With a 30 percent overall literacy rate in the country, training staff was a priority. “We brought in international experts, and we sent Afghans to other countries,” he said, recalling one group of Afghans—the first in 30 years—that traveled to Cambodia to learn how people there preserved environment and restored conservation efforts after experiencing the effects of a war-torn country.

“It was a major culture shock,” he said. “We went to an indigenous village in Cambodia and introduced this group of Afghans, most of whom have never left their country. The first thing the indigenous villagers did was offer rice wine, which was a problem for devout Muslims. Our group tried to talk a way out of that faux pas at the time, but we had multiple language barriers.”

Although Dehgan speaks Farsi—which is similar to the commonly spoken Dari language—most of the staff is trained in English. “We offered free English courses every morning. It may not seem to directly link to conservation work, but we thought it was key for people to reintegrate into science,” he said.

Dehgan takes special pride in working toward the development of a proposed 15,000-square-mile transboundary peace park that includes Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan and China.

“The basic idea was that if you can get people talking about science and environment and working together, maybe you can get people from these different countries to work together in other areas,” he said. “I think we made an incredible amount of progress in the time that we had. It’s not just an issue about environment, which I think is intrinsically valuable in itself. It’s an issue about identity and security, and I think it’s important for people to realize that.”

CHANGING BATTLEFIELDS

Dehgan often seems to take the road less traveled. For his vacation last year while serving in Afghanistan, he and his girlfriend, Kara Stevens, a former Peace Corps volunteer and colleague in Kabul, traveled to the jungles of the Bolivia Amazon. They hiked more than 140 miles of tropical rainforest in six days with 50-pound packs.

“It was absolutely incredible,” Dehgan said. “We were bitten by every single type of insect. My girlfriend looked like a leopard when she was done because she had so many insect bites all over her body.”

The highlight of the trip, according to this biologist, was spotting a different type of big cat: two jaguars in the wild, which “even the guide we were with had only seen one other one in 15 years,” he said. “We encountered two, which was pretty amazing.”

After working and traveling in nearly 70 countries on five continents, Dehgan said he is enjoying his time back in Washington, and so is his family.

“The entire time I was in Iraq, I told my mom I was working on the beach in Morocco,” he said. It wasn’t until he returned to the States that he told her where he really was. “But she was fine because she could see that I was still in one piece.”

Now, to his mom’s delight, the only battles Dehgan fights are political.