

In Memoriam

Peter Hellyer, 1947–2023

Peter Hellyer left an indelible mark as a journalist, historian, and archaeologist. Although not having had any formal training in archaeology, his life's work was a testament to his unwavering dedication to preserving and sharing the captivating stories of Abu Dhabi, the very essence of the UAE's rich cultural heritage. Peter Hellyer's journey to becoming an eminent figure in the world of journalism, history, and archaeology was nothing short of extraordinary. His early fascination with history and archaeology laid the foundation for a remarkable career that would span decades and leave an enduring legacy. Little did he know that his move to Abu Dhabi in 1975 would set the stage for a lifelong connection with the region and its history.



He once remarked, 'I came here as a young teacher, but Abu Dhabi and its history quickly captured my heart.' This love affair with the UAE's past would define his life's work. One of Peter Hellyer's notable contributions was his extensive writing on the history and culture of Abu Dhabi and the UAE. His words served as a bridge between the past and the present, weaving narratives that illuminated the rich tapestry of the region's heritage. His publications provided invaluable insights into the natural world of the UAE, as well as helping to promote its archaeology and history to the outside world. Hellyer's dedication to historical accuracy was a hallmark of his work. He once emphasized, 'In the realm of history, precision matters; it's about getting the details right.' His meticulous research and commitment to accuracy ensured that his writings were not just informative but also trustworthy sources for future generations of scholars and enthusiasts.

A true journalist at heart, Peter Hellyer was a fearless seeker of truth. His journalistic pursuits took him to the frontlines of important stories, where he reported with integrity and an unwavering commitment to ethical journalism. His reporting on issues ranging from environmental conservation to cultural preservation reflected his passion for the UAE and its people. Throughout his career, Hellyer championed the idea that journalism could serve as a powerful instrument for positive change. He once stated, 'Journalism can shine a light on issues that need attention, creating awareness and sparking action.' His belief in the transformative power of the press was evident in the impact of his work, which shed light on crucial societal and environmental challenges.

As a historian, Peter Hellyer had a remarkable ability to bring history to life. His words transported readers to a time when the sands of Abu Dhabi were traversed by traders and explorers, and when the stories of its people were yet to be written. His books and various other publications remain definitive works that capture the evolution of the UAE from ancient times to its modern identity.

One of his most enduring legacies lies in his archaeological contributions. Hellyer recognised that the land itself held the key to unravelling the mysteries of the past. His support for archaeological excavations uncovered artefacts and ancient settlements that provided a window into the lives of the people who once called this land home. In his own words, 'The soil beneath our feet is a treasure trove of history waiting to be discovered.'

Peter Hellyer's dedication to preserving the UAE's heritage extended beyond his scholarly pursuits. He actively participated in initiatives to protect the environment and cultural landmarks. His work with environmental organizations aimed to safeguard the natural beauty of the UAE, ensuring that future generations would continue to enjoy the pristine landscapes he so deeply admired. His profound commitment to cultural preservation was exemplified by his involvement in projects that sought to restore and maintain historical and natural sites, such as the Al Wathba Lake. He believed that these sites were not just relics of the past but also living testimonies to the region's rich history and natural wonders. His passion for conservation was summed up in his assertion that 'preserving our heritage is an investment in our future.'

Peter Hellyer was not only a historian and journalist but also a mentor and inspiration to many. He shared his knowledge generously, nurturing the next generation of historians and journalists. His willingness to guide and support emerging talents demonstrated his belief in the importance of passing on the torch of knowledge and dedication. On a personal note, I can say that Peter taught me to appreciate the wonders of the UAE, be they geology, palaeontology, archaeology, fauna, flora, history, or local cultural traditional practices. I miss him, his generous sharing of local knowledge, and our interesting conversations.

Peter will be remembered as being enthusiastic, passionate, articulate, an environmentalist, a writer, a fierce editor who was interested in archaeology, history, palaeontology, geology, natural history, birds, political and economic history of the UAE and the region, and UAE policy and its international relations. He was a staunch and loyal defender of the UAE, skilled in press releases and in drafting words in a suitable style that were sensitive to local cultural norms.

Mark Jonathan Beech

(Abridged from the obituary published in the *IASA Bulletin*, autumn 2023)

Photograph courtesy of Peter Hellyer's family