



MY OCTOPUS TEACHER

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION GUIDE

Table of Contents

ABOUT THE FILM 3

FROM THE FILMMAKERS 3

**USING MY OCTOPUS TEACHER
IN COMMUNITY SETTINGS 5**

FRAMING THE CONVERSATION 6

BACKGROUND INFORMATION 7

- The magic of The Great African Seaforest™ 8
- Making the Film: Science and Storytelling 10
- Octopus vulgaris - The Common Octopus 12

DISCUSSING THE FILM 13

- Post-Screening Questions 14
- How Nature Can Heal 15
- What Did the Octopus Teach Craig? 16
- Different Sense of Time and Perception 17
- The Intelligence of Nature 18

**EXPLORE AND EXPERIENCE:
ENGAGEMENT IDEAS 19**

TO LEARN MORE 25

SCREENING FAQS 27

About the film

My Octopus Teacher is a feature documentary following the story of Craig Foster who, suffering from a loss of purpose, begins a daily diving regimen in the freezing kelp forests at the tip of South Africa in order to re-energize himself. What he discovers below the water's surface is a deep connection to the natural world in the form of an unusually curious octopus who becomes a healer and grounding force in Foster's life.

This beautiful record of the octopus's entire life—something seldom achieved in the wild, let alone underwater—was shot over a full year and explores the habits and personality of a strange, undulating creature. Beyond intelligent, dextrous and resilient, the cephalopod shares her secret world with Foster as they develop a touching bond. The octopus shows him things that have never been recorded by science or on film and ultimately redefines Craig's understanding of the creatures we share our world with.

FROM THE FILMMAKERS:

*"I think what's powerful about the film is the fact that there's this big South African guy who is telling a deeply intimate story about an animal that is essentially a modified snail. He takes us into this fragile creature's world and she transforms from an underwater alien into a protagonist that we can really relate to and care about. At a minimum, I think that viewers will make an emotional connection with her, but I really hope that the bigger message that comes through will be an exploration of our own identity and fragility as part of the living planet. We chose — and it was an agonizing decision — not to have any overt conservation narratives in the film, but that message seems to be coming through subliminally. Judges have described the film as 'political,' 'feminist,' and showing 'respect for motherhood.' That really excited me."*²

PIPPA EHRLICH


CO-DIRECTOR, MY OCTOPUS TEACHER

"I went to the central Kalahari, about 20 years ago. I was making a film called "The Great Dance" with my brother and then I met these men who were probably some of the best trackers in the world. To watch these men go into the incredible subtle science in nature, things that my eye couldn't even see and then follow them, sometimes for hours, and find hidden animals in the landscape was just extraordinary to witness. I mean, they just were, inside of the natural world, and I could feel I was outside. And I had this deep longing to be inside that world."

CRAIG FOSTER

PRODUCER, MY OCTOPUS TEACHER

¹ Excerpted from <https://womenandhollywood.com/hot-docs-2020-women-directors-meet-pippa-ehrlich-my-octopus-teacher>

An underwater photograph showing sunlight rays filtering through the water surface, creating a dramatic, ethereal atmosphere. The water is a deep teal color, and the light rays are bright and focused. In the background, there are dark, rocky structures and some seaweed or coral. The overall mood is serene and mysterious.

*“She made me
realise just how
precious wild
places are.”*

CRAIG FOSTER
MY OCTOPUS TEACHER

Using *My Octopus Teacher* in Community Settings

“We’ve lost the most important and very simple truth: the earth and the ocean give us every breath of air and every mouthful of food. Yet we’ve abandoned them, somehow thinking we are independent children. We focus on economic and political issues instead of realising that the foundation of all life is the natural world.”²

CRAIG FOSTER

The extraordinary documentary *My Octopus Teacher* offers audiences a nature documentary unlike any other. Following the deep relationship forged between Craig Foster and a female common octopus, audiences around the world will be in awe of the natural world and the insights Foster shares of this journey.

Depending upon the tools you have available, and if you are online or in person, you can discuss and engage with your audience through an online chat, an online panel, or in-person discussion groups. Consider opening your screening by sharing these goals developed by the film team behind *My Octopus Teacher*:

- **LEARN** about the little-known and under researched Great African Seaforest.
- **BE INSPIRED** to develop new relationships with the natural world.
- **UNDERSTAND** the interconnections in nature through the life of the octopus.
- **APPRECIATE** the intelligence of nature and see its role as a healing force.

² Craig Foster and Ross Frylinck, *Sea Change: Return to the Wild*, (Cape Town: Quivertree Publications, 2018), 198.



Framing the Conversation

My Octopus Teacher brings audiences into the Great African Seaforest and the underwater journey of Craig Foster offering deep insights to the role nature can play in nurturing mental health, wellness, and healing from trauma.

Here are some suggested best practices to adapt for your setting:

- ▶ **SHARE** clear norms for discussion including respect for one another and for the facilitator, appropriate language, and confidentiality.
- ▶ **SPOTLIGHT** the beauty of The Great African Seaforest by shining a light on the ways all of us, wherever we live, can preserve its beauty.
- ▶ **CREATE** inclusive, accessible, and welcoming spaces where audiences can share their own experiences.
- ▶ **OFFER** local and national resources for individuals to access about mental health and wellness.
- ▶ **CELEBRATE** efforts of conservation and preservation of natural habitats within local and global communities.



Background Information

REVIEW AND SHARE

“What’s so amazing about this environment is you’re in a three-dimensional forest and you can jump off the top and go anywhere you want, you’re flying basically.”

CRAIG FOSTER
MY OCTOPUS
TEACHER

THE MAGIC OF THE GREAT AFRICAN SEAFOREST

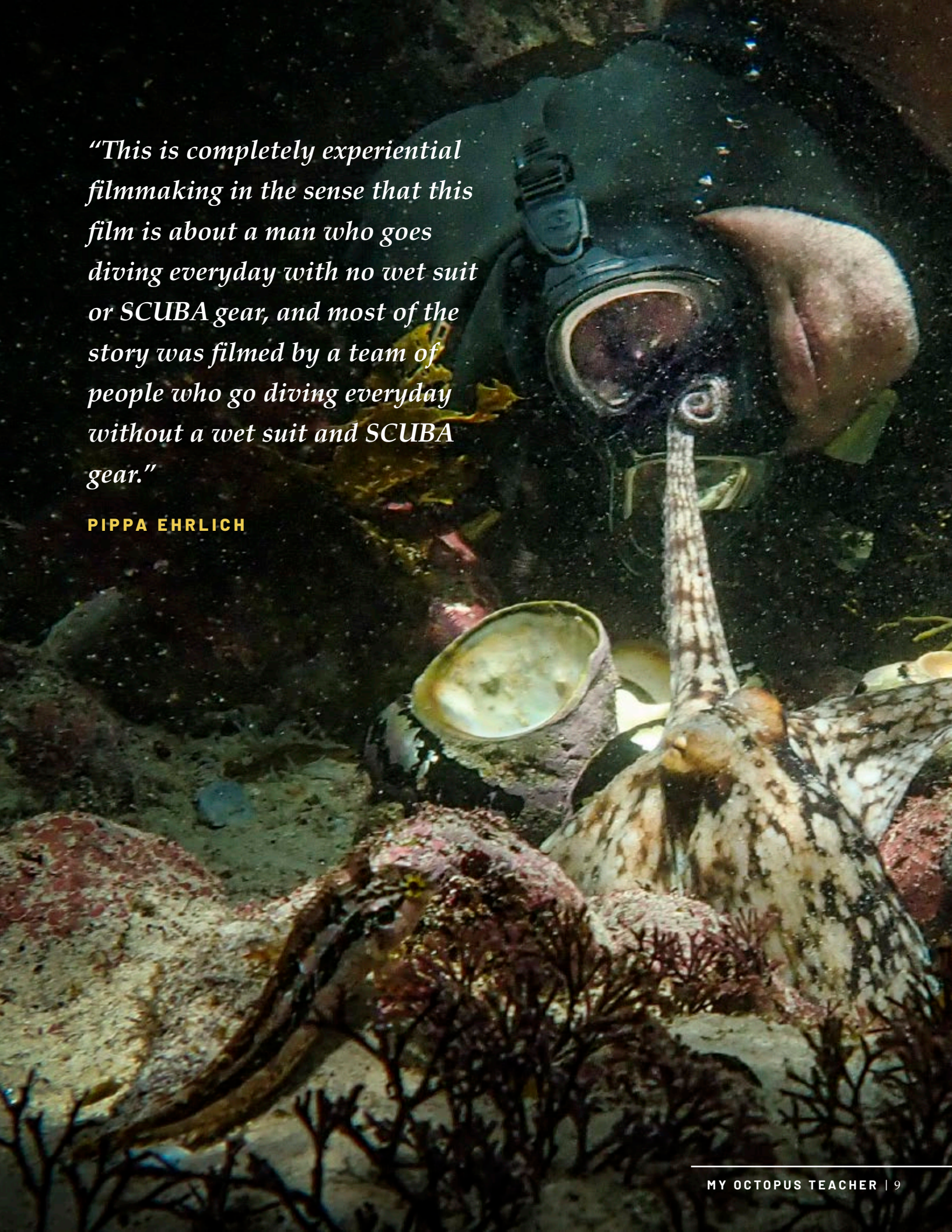
My Octopus Teacher was filmed in the Great African Seaforest, a giant underwater forest that fringes the shores of Cape Town and stretches north for more than 1000 kilometers into Namibia. Globally the kelp forests cover about 25% of the earth’s coastline. In some locations kelp forests are shrinking or disappearing and it is critical to preserve these ecosystems, but the Great African Seaforest is believed to be growing.

This tip of Africa is also known as the cape of storms and the kelp forest in its underwater region is a fragile, ever-changing wonderland, that provides food and shelter for thousands of species. Some of these animals are found nowhere else on Earth and others are not yet known to science.

The Great African Seaforest:

- Provides a home for thousands of animals, including the Octopus Teacher’s descendants.
- Is the heart of the world. Human beings have lived on the shores of the Great African Seaforest for more than 100,000 years and the oldest archaeological evidence of art and science is found here. This is every human being’s original home.
- Is an intact wild space for people to visit and connect to, reminding us that we are part of the natural world.
- Is a global treasure and a place of extreme natural beauty.
- Plays an important role in climate mitigation, because it covers such a massive area, sequestering carbon and creating oxygen.
- Acts as a nursery area for fishes, supporting Africa’s fisheries.
- Protects the coastline from storms - especially as sea levels rise and weather becomes more extreme.³

³ Excerpted from Sea Change Project <https://seachangeproject.com/stories/>.

A close-up photograph of a diver's mask and snorkel resting on a rocky seabed. The mask is black with a clear lens and a strap. The snorkel is attached to the side of the mask. The seabed is covered with various marine life, including a large, patterned sea slug (nudibranch) in the foreground, a large, flat, light-colored shell, and several pieces of red and brown coral. The water is dark and slightly murky, with some small particles visible.

“This is completely experiential filmmaking in the sense that this film is about a man who goes diving everyday with no wet suit or SCUBA gear, and most of the story was filmed by a team of people who go diving everyday without a wet suit and SCUBA gear.”

PIPPA EHRLICH

MAKING THE FILM: SCIENCE AND STORYTELLING

Diving Facts from *My Octopus Teacher*

- Water temperature can drop to as low as 8 or 9 degrees celsius, or between 46 and 48 degrees fahrenheit.
- The cold water stimulates brain activity as a flood of chemicals is unleashed when the human body is exposed to these low temperatures.
- Craig and the filming team trained themselves to hold their breath for up to 2 minutes while diving. While at times it may have exceeded two minutes, they seldom needed to push beyond this time.


[The Sea Change Project](#) is the team behind the creation of *My Octopus Teacher*. The project is a creative collective of filmmakers, journalists, and scientists all fascinated by the Great African Seaforest and working to protect it.

“We call our work living science because we are studying the lives of kelp forest animals and bringing their stories to life in our media projects. We touch people’s hearts and we speak to them in a language that is grounded in science, but tells great stories.”

The Sea Change Project believes that if you want to inspire behavioral change and a deep understanding of our connection and influence on nature, we need to speak to people from an emotional point of view.⁴

⁴ <https://seachangeproject.com/projects/>.





*“Unknowingly I had met the greatest teacher of my life, a young female common octopus, *Octopus vulgaris*. I visited her den every day for weeks.*

After a few months she gradually realized that I posed no threat and she began to trust me. I was allowed into her wild inner world and felt as though an ancient door to nature had been opened to me.”⁵

CRAIG FOSTER
MY OCTOPUS TEACHER

⁵ Foster and Frylinck, *Sea Change*, p. 204.

OCTOPUS VULGARIS

THE COMMON OCTOPUS⁶

CEPHALOPODS: a class of mollusks including octopus, squid, cuttlefish, and others with reduced and/or hidden shells. They can change color for camouflage, squirt ink, and are highly intelligent creatures with decentralized brain and neural networks. *Octopus vulgaris* (common octopus) is a cephalopod.



- > Life expectancy, 12-18 months.
- > Uses tools - Craig recorded the first known instance of an octopus using many shells or kelp leaves for armour.
- > Eats other mollusks, crabs and lobsters by hunting and trapping.
- > Bores holes in shells, and injects prey with venom to remove it from rocks and shells.

- > Demonstrates play behavior in captivity: Craig believes he recorded first instance of this behavior in the wild.
- > Lives alone in caves and crevices: only social contact for fertilizing eggs.
- > Females die after laying eggs and oxygenating and guarding them.
- > Eggs hatch with no mother or father to teach them adaptation or hunting.



- > Masters of camouflage: imitating both inanimate objects and other creatures.
- > Multiple forms of defense: squirting ink, fighting postures, hiding, surfacing, using armor, and others.
- > Major predators: sharks, seals, and humans.
- > Decentralized neural network: thinks, learns and senses with her whole body.

- > 2000 suckers act independently.
- > An octopus' intelligence may be comparable to a dog, cat, or lower primate.
- > Cephalopod intelligence emerged when they traded the safety of a shell for a large brain.
- > An octopus is a learning machine whose life is a balance between curiosity and fear.



⁶ Facts adopted from 1) Foster and Frylinck, *Sea Changee*, pp. 202-231, and 2) <https://www.thecephalopodpage.org>

An underwater scene showing a large octopus with a mottled brown and white pattern on its skin. The octopus is positioned in the upper half of the frame, with its head and arms visible. In the lower half, a smaller, vibrant orange and brown striped crab is on the sandy seabed. The background is filled with various marine life, including seaweed and other small organisms. A semi-transparent yellow banner is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the text "Discussing the Film".

Discussing the Film

The octopus teacher ambushing a Cape rock crab (*Guinusia chabrus*)



Aggregation of Spotted gully sharks (*Triakis megalopterus*)

POST-SCREENING QUESTIONS

After the film, consider beginning a conversation with these general questions on the documentary before discussing and engaging in suggested topics.

- What are the moments or scenes in the film that stand out to you?
- What questions would you like to ask Craig or the filmmakers about *My Octopus Teacher*?
- How do you think his interactions with the kelp forest, and the octopus in particular, changed Craig?
- Do you, or have you, had a “teacher” in nature?
- If you can identify this kind of teacher, what did you learn?
- Craig purposefully chooses not to intervene in the lifecycle of the octopus at several moments in the documentary. Why do you think he made this choice? Would you make the same decision? Why or why not?
- The documentary begins with Craig Foster saying, “A lot of people say that an octopus is like an alien... But the strange thing is, as you get closer to them you realise that we’re very similar in a lot of ways,” and it ends with “What she [the octopus] taught me was to feel, that you’re part of this place not a visitor, that’s a huge difference.” Reflect and share your thoughts on the choice of the filmmakers to bookend these two statements as a frame for *My Octopus Teacher*.

Discussion Topics

The following topics invite deeper discussion and reflection on *My Octopus Teacher*.

HOW NATURE CAN HEAL



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- > What connects Craig to his natural world?
- > Why do you believe his daily dive was a healing process?
- > Craig's daily discipline and tracking of the octopus opened up opportunities to discover new ocean species and previous behaviors never witnessed before. Can you think of a time when you discovered something new? How did this process change your point of view or perception?

*"If you spend a lot of time in a natural environment you start to feel connected to it and connected to yourself in ways you could never have imagined."*⁷

PIPPA EHRLICH

"One of the most exciting things ever in my life, taking my son with me, walking along the shore and just showing him the wonders of nature and the details and the intricacies. I was getting so much from the wild and I could actually now give. I had so much energy to give back."

CRAIG FOSTER

On witnessing the octopus' healing after the shark attack:

"...And then the most amazing thing to see this tiny little miniature, perfect miniature arm starting to grow back. It gave me a strange sort of confidence that she can get past this incredible difficulty and I felt in my life I was getting past the difficulties I had. In this strange way our lives were mirroring each other. My relationship with people, with humans, was changing."

CRAIG FOSTER

⁷ Excerpt from Interview with *My Octopus Teacher* Director, Pippa Ehrlich.

WHAT DID THE OCTOPUS TEACH CRAIG?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

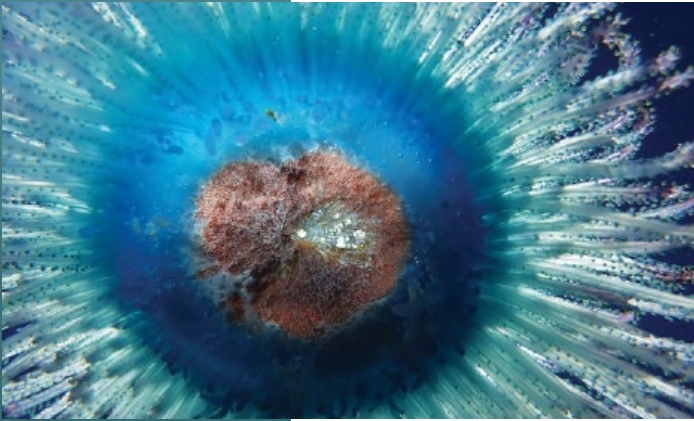
- In your own words, how would you describe Craig's lessons from the octopus?
- What did you learn from witnessing his journey with the octopus?
- Is there any experience in your own life that Craig's story reminds you of? If not, is there a place, or a particular environment you'd like to interact with?

"She was teaching me to become sensitised to the other. Especially wild creatures."

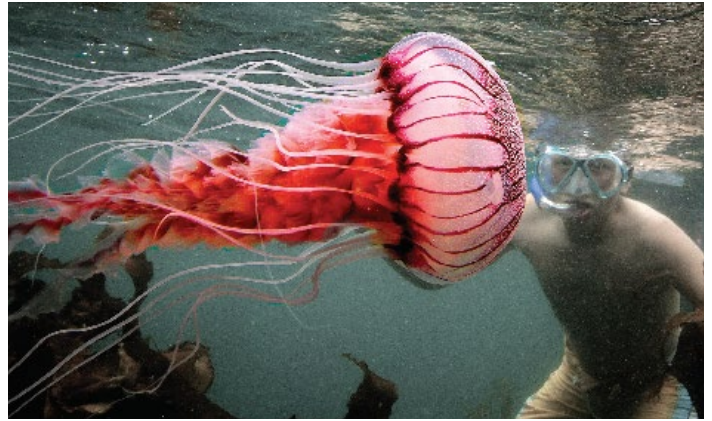
"That connection with an animal is absolutely mind blowing. No greater feeling on earth. The boundaries seemed to dissolve ... pure magnificence of her."

"At the base of all those arms there's a drill that can drill through a hard shell and then drop venom in there like a snake and see how that mollusc reacts. But some of these molluscs will only relax if that drill is precisely in the apex of the shell, on the abductor muscle. She basically has to do geometry to work out exactly the precise spot where she needs to drill that shell in order to get her food. This is high level invertebrate intelligence, her ability to learn and remember details. And it hit me how she was teaching me so much."

CRAIG FOSTER



Blue button (*Porpita porpita*)



Compass jellyfish (*Chrysaora agulhasensis*)

DIFFERENT SENSE OF TIME AND PERCEPTION

“I started to wonder how octopuses experience time. Their time is not like ours; one of her months is equivalent to almost five years of my life. Each moment spent with her as she guided me around our forest was deeply precious to me. Then I wondered whether all the different species have a different sense of time. Perhaps they live outside the world of time altogether?”

I know my octopus teacher has a very good memory, drawing on past experience to plan future hunting expeditions. Yet I felt that she mostly lived in the present. . . . I feel that the great mind of nature lives in the present, with almost no concern for the so-called future, free to focus moment to moment.”⁸

CRAIG FOSTER



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- > Have you ever had an experience where time seemed to change, either to speed up, slow down, or disappear altogether? What sparked that change? What was it like?
- > What do you think it means to “live in the present?”
- > Octopuses’ brains are spread throughout their bodies, so their experience of sensations is also spread throughout their bodies. How is this different to the way humans experience sensation?

⁸ Foster and Frylinck, *Sea Change*, p 230.

THE INTELLIGENCE OF NATURE



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How do the living things in the kelp forest interact with one another?
- Why do you think Craig Foster describes those interactions as a “forest mind”? What does it mean to you to think of nature’s intelligence?
- Where do you think humans fit in the natural world?


“People ask, ‘Why are you going to the same place every day?’, but that’s when you see the subtle differences and that’s when you get to know the wild. So when these thousands of threads going off from the octopus to all the other animals, predator and prey and then this incredible forest, just nurturing all of this. And now I know how the helmet-shell is connected to the urchin and how the octopus is connected to the helmet-shell and as I draw all these lines, all these stories are just being thrown out. It’s almost like the forest mind. You really could feel it, that big creature, that was thousands of times more awake and intelligent than I am. This is like a giant underwater brain operating over millions of years. And it just keeps everything in balance.”

CRAIG FOSTER

An underwater photograph of a kelp forest. Sunlight rays stream down from the surface, illuminating the dark green kelp stalks and golden-brown leaves. The scene is serene and natural.

Explore and Experience:
Engagement Ideas

PRACTICE



Whether or not an ocean is nearby, the practices and skills that Craig Foster and the filmmaking team relied upon - **close observation, tracking,** and **cataloguing** clues - can be used by anyone in any place to learn from and connect with nature.

THE DISCIPLINE OF CLOSE OBSERVATION

“It’s a hard thing to explain but sometimes you just get a feeling and you know, there’s something to this creature that’s very unusual. There’s something to learn here. There’s something special about her. And then I had this crazy idea, what happens if I just went every day? What happens if I never missed a day?”

“It took going in every day to really know her environment. Initially it all just seems like much of the same thing. But then, after a while, you see all the different types of the forest.”

CRAIG FOSTER

TRACKING

“[W]hen Craig Foster agreed to teach me to track, I assumed I would learn to read physical signs in the environment. I have since realized that tracking is not so much about interpreting physical marks as it is a way to make sense of the world, both inside and outside of yourself. It is an exercise in the making of meaning, both literal and otherwise, from things that you encounter in your life. The more sophisticated your understanding of the natural environment around you, the more clues you have for interpretation and the more fascinating the conversation becomes. It’s like learning the language of a new place: a greater vocabulary allows for much deeper and more meaningful connections with the people around you.”⁹

PIPPA EHRLICH

DEFINITION OF A TRACKER

(noun)

a person who is able to find animals or people by following the marks they leave on the ground as they move over it.

⁹ Foster and Frylinck, *Sea Change*, p 271.





COLLECTING AND CATALOGUING CLUES

“This animal [octopus] has spent millions of years learning to be impossible to find. I had to learn what octopus tracks look like and that was very frustrating at first, it’s so difficult to discern - what’s the difference between octopus tracks and heart urchin tracks? And fish tracks? And worm tracks? And the predation marks. The egg casings...I needed to learn everything.

And then you have to start thinking like an octopus. It’s like being a detective and you just slowly get all your clues together. And then I started to make breakthroughs... So I’m looking at kills, I’m looking at little marks, diggings in the sand, little changes in the algal patterns where she’s been moving and then knowing- ok this animal is very close now, it’s close, it’s within one or two metres and then focussing on that small space. And then, bang. She’s there.”

CRAIG FOSTER

ENGAGEMENT IDEAS



PANEL DISCUSSION

Whether in person or online, a panel discussion is often an informative and engaging opportunity to bring together scientists, filmmakers, naturalists, and other community members to discuss their fields. Consider inviting local biologists, scientists, naturalists, etc. to inform your post-discussion event.



OBSERVATION ACTIVITY

Identify a place you can observe everyday, individually or as a class. If possible, find a space outdoors. If not, choose a part of the school or home that is not in heavy use.

Visit the space every day for thirty days, and record observations:

- > What in the space is permanent, or stays the same?
- > What changes and moves?
- > What 'tracks' can you perceive in the space? Who, or what, has been present there?
- > What do the changes and tracks communicate to you?

At the end of thirty days:

- > What did you learn?
- > What patterns did you notice?
- > Looking back on your notes, did they change during the days? Were there days you saw more, or less? To what do you attribute those changes?



Common octopus on stipe of Sea bamboo (*Ecklonia maxima*)



LISTEN AND LEARN: MASTER TRACKER JON YOUNG

- Share his Ted Talk "[Repairing emotional isolation by reawakening deep nature connection](#)"¹⁰ (run time: 17:50)
- Explore Jon Young's blog and research: [Connection First & Musings](#)



EXPLORE AND EXPERIENCE: A MINDFULNESS EXERCISE

Mindfulness is paying attention to the experiences of our present moment with openness and curiosity and a willingness to be with what is. It's a quality of attention that we can have at any moment.

In *My Octopus Teacher*, Craig's daily diving can be understood as a practice of self-care and mindfulness. As you reflect on your own life at this point, consider these questions:

- What are the ways I physically and emotionally take care of myself?
- Do I have reliable strategies to deal with stress? What are they?
- How do I maintain a sense of calm and wellbeing in my relationships with others?
- What does it mean to lead a more conscious life?

¹⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMWSvUp0CYk&feature=emb_logo

To Learn More

SUPPORT THE WORK OF THE SEA CHANGE PROJECT
WWW.SEACHANGEPROJECT.COM

There has been very little research into the ecological and social value of the Great African Seaforest and no advocacy for its protection. Sea Change Project is in the ocean every day, learning about the hidden world of the Great African Seaforest and finding stories that inspire people to fall in love with it. We believe the best way to protect the Great African Seaforest is to share these stories, so that people all over the world recognise the value of this special place.



African clawless otter (*Aonyx capensis*)

UNDERSTAND THE THREATS TO THE GREAT AFRICAN SEAFOREST:

- Lack of Knowledge and Awareness makes it challenging to advocate for its protection.
- Overfishing, commercially and recreationally, has caused drastic declines of ecologically important species which results in the loss of diversity globally.
- Chemical waste from the Western Cape exposes marine life to pollution.
- Climate change: ocean acidification, rising sea-temperatures threaten seaforests, and many of them are disappearing.
- Poaching contributes to the drastic decimation of rock lobsters and abalone that play important ecological roles in the kelp forest.
- Ocean mining: oceans are connected systems and mining disturbances could have a devastating impact on the seaforest (98% of South Africa's ocean territory has been earmarked for mining).
- Plastic pollution with an abundance of microplastics within the marine life.



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SCREENING FAQS

> How do I stream the film on Netflix?

- In order to play from the Netflix platform, your home or venue must have an internet connection with at least 5 Mbps download speed. You can test the internet speed by visiting a site like fast.com.
- Allow the film to load before hitting play to improve playback.
- If you are hosting a community screening, don't forget to do a tech check at your venue, with the equipment and internet connection you plan to use for your screening—ideally a week before your event.
- Problems with streaming? Consult the [Netflix Help Center](#) to troubleshoot network connection issues.

> Can I stream the film from the Netflix app?

- Using the Netflix app, you can download the film to play it offline. This feature is available for mobile phones (iPhones and Androids), tablets, and computers running Windows 10.
- If you are hosting a community screening, run a tech check at your venue after you download the film, using the equipment you will use during your screening—ideally a full week before your event.
- Need help with the app? Learn more about the app on the [Netflix Help Center](#).

> How long is the film?

1 hour, 25 minutes.

> Important Reminders + Information

- All screening hosts must read and abide by the [Netflix screening license](#).
- A reminder that you cannot fundraise or charge admission to any *My Octopus Teacher* event. Thank you for understanding!



MY OCTOPUS TEACHER

GUIDE DEVELOPED BY



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