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Alan is able to be very relaxed with the elephants here in Namibia.

Out of the Everyday Mind

Eleanor O'Hanlon writes of close encounters in the Okavango Delta in Botswana, one of Africa's few remaining wildlife sanctuaries for lions and elephants

In the rainless October days, the sage bushes dry to crisp stalks of yellow light and their scents grow denser in the heat. By mid-afternoon the grasses are a tawny blaze and the lions have lain down to sleep in their thickets of shade.

My guides, South African Alan McSmith, and his Bayei friend Sam Matabele walk ahead of me in single file, along aromatic trails of sage. Elephants have left fresh dung balls smelling of grassy sweetness, like new-mown hay. Lion tracks run between them, pressed into gray-white sand. We follow the weighty pressure marks of their paws, the still-damp urine patches that stain the sand. Sam scans the ground as he walks with outstretched hand: sensing the quality of the air the lions have stirred along the trail, guided not only by the visible signs of their passing, but by subtle links with them inside.

"I feel lions inside me," he tells me later. "I feel them in my body."

He stops in a clearing, ten meters or so from some leadwood trees, and points into the thicket. The black tassel of a tail flicks into the light. Round tawny ears appear and the lioness lifts her head from her paws and directs her amber gaze on us through the dry crackle of the grasses. Her mate, a dark outline behind her, stirs sleepily and growls.

His low throbbing builds to a roar that vibrates through the clearing. It is one of the most extraordinary sounds I have ever heard, elemental, implacable like thunder. I feel it pressing on soft vital places, permeating the cavity of my chest, reaching into the spaces between heart and lungs. Yet I know instinctively this is no threat: the lion is sounding the vital assertion of their presence here in the burning afternoon. 'The hollow space inside the chest', the river bushmen of the Okavango call the lion, for they know them through this resonance inside.

Alan and Sam stand quietly beside me. They share the stillness born of long experience in the bush; neither would think of carrying a weapon here. Our stillness is our wordless message to the lions that we mean them no disturbance and no harm, and without speaking we walk respectfully away.

The Okavango Delta is a watery Eden soaking the dry heart of the Kalahari, and it has become an essential refuge for some of Africa's most threatened wild creatures. Fifty years ago, there were some half a million lions in Africa. Today, scarcely twenty thousand remain, with three thousand breeding males. Thanks to the rigorous conservation ethics of the Botswana government, which places a total ban on hunting of any kind, northern Botswana and the Okavango wetlands are among the lions' last true wild spaces, and a place where elephants live at peace, free from the terrible fear and grief inflicted on them elsewhere in Africa by current waves of poaching.

Gliding in the mokoro, the dugout canoe of the Bayei people, through water channels winding among reed and papyrus, past palm-fringed islands, and through shallow pools and lagoons where waterlilies open their yellow hearts to the sun, I feel I have entered a dream that is more vital and more vivid than the ordinary waking world. The water between the lilies is shot with green-gold light, and when I cup my hands and drink, I taste the forgotten purity of water from the foundations of the world.

Every glance is fed by freshness: the great egret lifting from the reeds; the fish eagle balanced on a branch; the African

jacana that steps lightly across the water-lily leaves. Red lechwe browse along the banks and wading elephants waft their ears and lift trunks laden with water into dripping mouths.

The delta is the culmination of one of the earth's most extensive and pristine river systems, fed by remote source lakes and rivers high in the mountains of Angola which flood each year from the heavy winter rains. At the driest time of year in the Kalahari, these flood waters pour down through tributary branches, merge into the Okavango river and fan out through a myriad of channels across the sand.

The annual flooding, and the slow withdrawal of the waters, are like the beating of a great heart, Alan says, as he helps me unfold the patterns of connection woven through termite mounds and elephant dung, hippo trails and ancient leadwood trees. The termites are the master builders and decomposers of the Okavango; their tall nest mounds, elegantly engineered with a vast network of underground channels, build the foundations for the delta's network of islands. It is fascinating to see how the termites work on the elephant dung balls: they roof small channels on the surface with clay so they stay sheltered from the sun while working to extract nutrients from the dung.

These raised termite mounds make a good place to watch elephant family groups feeding on the flood plains. Mothers, aunts, sisters live in close unison their entire lives, the young ones loved, sheltered and educated by their side. Plucking, lifting and chewing, great ears slowly fanning, their unhurried movements are rooted in a stillness of being that is immensely powerful, yet peaceful to observe.

A solitary elephant feeds at the edge of the flood plain. A male, we assume, for they spend more time alone. We sit down at the base of a kigelia, or sausage tree, and wait for him to pass. Walking among elephants for many years, guiding and training others to be guides themselves, Alan has discovered that the simple act of sitting on the ground helps us humans to root ourselves, and be among elephants in a more peaceful way.

But as the elephant approaches, we see it is an elderly female. She gazes at us through some branches, and touches her forehead with her trunk, a thoughtful gesture among elephants. Then, mind apparently made up, she heads in our direction.

Age has hollowed the haunting contours of her face and sunk her temples towards the bone. Grand-mother and great-grandmother, carrying the experience of some seventy years, on the last set of teeth that accompany elephants into old age and death, she strides barely three paces past us on silent, padded feet.

"I said to her inwardly, don't go," Alan tells me later. And perhaps she heard his call, for she halts and stands for a moment at the edge of the grove, one great foot tilted towards us. It seems to me that she is listening inwardly, sensing our being and intentions. And what I feel from her then is a wave of understanding, and acceptance. As though she has given us her blessing.

That sense of blessing stays in the days that follow. Walking out at dawn each morning from our campsite beneath the towering kigelia trees laced with red flowers, I feel the pulsating rhythms of the Okavango mounting through the soles of my feet. "Did you notice that the animals don't move away from us any more?" Alan remarks one afternoon. I look around and



Photos © Stephen Pope

Above: An elephant family group of female relatives and young, led by their matriarch.

Below: Great egret between the reeds and water-lily pools of the Okavango.



Eleanor O'Hanlon is an award-winning writer and conservationist with a passion for re-connecting with the inner, spiritual dimension of animals and the natural world. She has carried out field research for international conservation groups and her articles on wildlife and wilderness have appeared in BBC Wildlife and other magazines. Her first book Eyes of the Wild (www.green-shopping.co.uk/eyes-of-the-wild.html) was awarded the Nautilus Gold Book Award for Nature. She is a contributor to the updated 2016 anthology Spiritual Ecology The Cry of the Earth and she works with the UK Spiritual Ecology Fellowship programme for emerging young leaders. Visit her website: <https://eyesofthewild.org/>

Alan McSmith is a true wilderness man with 30 years of guiding experience in six African countries. His passion for elephants combines with his intuitive knowledge and understanding, and his deep commitment to wilderness and elephant conservation.

For information on the Okavango visit <https://intotheokavango.org>

Check out the video, 'Why Wolves Change Whole Ecosystems' on PM's website: <http://tiny.cc/wolves-ecosystems>

realize it's true: even the attentive impala haven't stirred when we appeared. We are no longer such strangers here. Step by step, we have been walking out of the everyday human mind, with its turmoil and distraction, and every moment spent in silent attention to the life of the bush has become a merging with a deeper state of being.

That same evening we walk a few minutes out from camp to a clay pan where Alan wants to draw a map of his beloved Okavango on the ground. We have just stepped onto a termite mound to get some height and scan around when four elephants appear out of a thicket. They see us immediately, and rumble long and deep. Without any hesitation, they head directly towards our termite mound.

We don't exchange a word, but stand still as they approach – one is a mother, with two young ones at her side, who are maybe four and eight years old. Her companion is male, and he is courting this lovely young female. His penis is extended and semi-erect, and he touches her with his trunk, in gentle enquiry, a tentative caress. When they reach the base of our termite mound, and stand before us side by side, the male towers so close I could reach out a hand and touch him on the trunk.

I have no thoughts in that moment. There are no maps for this meeting which has emerged beyond our expectation or seeking. My mind is set utterly aside as the elephants unfold us with the immediacy of their presence. Their bodies are the smell of the bush made majestic flesh. In their eyes is knowledge, beyond human words, borne through the generations of their ancestors who have walked through the earth's deep time, shaping and making and renewing as they walk.

Before they walk away from us again, I bow my head: I bow to the immense depth of the life that they have allowed me to feel. As a silent prayer of thanks that we have met together at this sharp and urgent edge of time: humans and elephants, male and female, adults and young, standing in peace on the ground of Africa.

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