

## MY OCTOPUS TEACHER

By Stephen Geller

Craig Foster lived this documentary revelation.  
It was directed by Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed.

In the Southernmost part of the Atlantic Ocean, off of southern Africa, Craig Foster discovered an underwater forest he would grow to understand:

“The forest mind...It was thousands of times more intelligent than I am...This is like a giant underwater brain operating over millions of years...And it just keeps everything in balance...Everything seemed so perfect in the forest...”

And then he met an octopus, and his life changed even further. Their lives, however, are short. And yet, in that year, Foster experienced each phase of his underwater friend’s life:

“You’re in touch with this wild place. It’s speaking to you. Its language is visible. I fell in love with her, but also with that amazing wildness she represents, and how that changed me.”

He observed the octopus, and when she was comfortable with his presence and realized he was nonthreatening, in an overwhelmingly dramatic moment, she literally reached out to him.

“My relationship with the sea forest and its creatures deepened week after month after year. “

In another extraordinary moment, towards the end of her life’s cycle, Foster saw his friend playing with fish. Then “she lost physical interest in the fish. Grabbed hold of me. And that was the last time I had physical contact with the animal.”

Shortly, Foster discovered a male octopus nested beside her, and then their mating ritual began. Afterwards, “she no longer hunted, no longer moved. She was oxygenating those eggs with her siphon, looking after them, timing her death exactly for the hatching of those eggs... Sacrificing her life for her young.”

After giving birth up to half a million young, “she came out of the den, barely alive. And the fish came, the scavengers, and fed on her. It was heart-breaking. A part of me wanted to hold her, and chase them away. But I didn’t do that. The next day, a big shark came, and took her away, in the misty forest.”

Her life was over.

“I fell in love with her, but also with that amazing wildness she represents, and how that changed me...What she taught me was to feel that you’re part of this place, not a

visitor. That's a huge difference."

As we know, cats, dogs, birds also and obviously teach us their languages. They reach out to us in very specific and personal ways.

I have a distinct relationship with porpoises, and my wife with an orca.

Both of us have spent time in a rhino house in the Phoenix Zoo with a 500 hundred pound baby, while its mother and father looked on from behind a cement wall.

From that first encounter with his son, Howell B's rhino papa would come to me from his setting whenever I called. He would try to climb the wall so we could commune, with me scratching his lovely ears and talking to him while he grunted a satisfied response.

Even now, Kae and I call our other friend, Alice, a wild alligator living in a bog behind our house, and she will lift herself out of the muck and swim over to us, turning her head from one of us to the other, listening. We don't feed her. We never would. Alice is acting out of curiosity and good feeling, not out of hunger. We can feel her most strongly in our hearts, as we felt the rhinos, and of course our own pets.

The heart is the most primal and to my mind the most important organ of perception. All other responses are learned, or imagined. If you feel it in your heart, there's never dissembling. It's there, the feeling, responsive in an ancient impulse of trust.

Flora, fauna, trees are no different. They communicate as well.

As Craig Foster said, at the end of the documentary: "What she taught me was to feel that you're part of this place, not a visitor. That's a huge difference."

Craig Foster saw, in his son's growing love of the underwater forest, an enthusiasm that caused him to exclaim, "I was getting so much from the wild, that I could actually now give, and there was so much energy to give. Thousands of hours in nature can teach a child to be gentle...To see how vulnerable these wild animals' lives are, and actually, then, how vulnerable all our lives are on this planet."

This stunning documentary, which demonstrated how far our societies have dismissed the humane and compassionate impulse towards each other, had made me wonder:

Is our present sociopathic indifference to each other and to Nature, and our seeming preference for a "Metaverse," a sign of our own desire for our own coming extinction?