

# BEAR ENVIRONMENT

## MAGAZINE OF THE SOCIETY OF ENVIRONMENTAL AUTHORS AND JOURNALISTS

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## **Welcome to the Spring 2024 edition of Bear Environment.**

We had hoped to present the magazine in a new format, but time has beaten us, so we hope you will still enjoy what we have prepared for you. As usual I would like to sincerely thank all our contributors to our Winter 2023 edition. Many of the stories, images and poems were awesome. We really must again appeal to all our members and friends world-wide to keep sending us your stories, poems, drawings, and photographs. We as usual will not always agree with some conclusions but we hope our even handed, approach will allow all to freely state their opinions. We do not engage in racial or religious debate.

We will eventually be running Awards for Aspiring Young Environmental Writers on an annual basis. This will not be for members only, since our membership is really for those already involved or working in the industry of environmental issues and matters.

Robert Tansey (Editor)

## **My Letters to the Environment: The Ocean**



Dear Ocean,

When I stand on the beach, my toes flexing in the sand, I find my mind drifting back and forth, like your waters on the shore. I'm not very old, barely even 12 years, and I know I must seem insignificant next to your vast expanse and ancient depths - but I can't help but dwell on the magnitude of everything that you are. You're such an incredible thing, with your deep, shimmering, crystal blue, and your rippling body that changes by the second. I know what people see when they look at you – I know the wonder, the sense of peace, the deep pull of a purpose that hasn't yet been fully defined, and I know the fear, the uncertainty that each new moment brings. I look at you and your endless blue depths peer back at me, drawing me in, taking a hold of me. I can feel it in my soul. You're like the fire, calm one moment, and towering with a wild rage the next, but always burning with a cool flame that threatens to consume me.

Your enormity overwhelms me, no matter how I try, I don't think I will ever be able to fully grasp just how immense you are. I'm not sure I believe in a god, but if mother nature exists, I think her heart lives within you. With your gentle flowing waves lapping gently at the shore, and your rich life-giving waters. You are steady, balanced, dependable. You nurture such vast diversity and wonderful beauty inside you, the life you breed is truly fascinating and remarkable. But just as it comes, you can also take it away, as you battle with the sky and land for domination. Wild and vast you let loose a raging power that threatens to crash down upon everything you meet. But still, I do not shy from you. Whatever mood I feel in me I see reflected in you, and I find that comforting.

I don't think I have learnt the words yet to describe everything you are to me, and I'm not sure I even understand all of the reasons why. The first time I saw you it filled me with joy and wonder and birthed in me an adventurous spirit that drives me even still. For the first time in my life, I felt a deep fascination and need to understand – to explore and discover – and research all I could. I learnt to scuba dive in your embrace and the things I saw opened my mind to wonders I had never imagined. The intricate dance of interactions between all of your children, the vibrance of a coral reef, the elegance of schooling fish. And everywhere I look I find more questions than answers – a endless pool of unknown wonders. From that first day, watching you has brought me calm, happiness and a deep sense of being at peace. Through every one of life's struggles I dwell on these feelings and draw inner strength from them.

But then the worry sinks in. A deep sense of dread that one day all this beauty may perish. It steals my breath and leaves a hard knot of anguish where my heart should be. The more I see the more a burning anger blazes within me, fuelled by knowledge of people all over the world callously or mindlessly destroying you. Soon there will be nothing left – and I can't imagine a greater sorrow that could befall us. I feel the hurt being inflicted upon you as if it were my own and I need you to know how truly sorry I am for my kind and our endless greed that we justify as progress. I am so, deeply, sorry.

If I could talk to you, I would try to send you hope, and strength to keep going. To hold on and survive until you can be healed from the myriad of damage humans are causing. Because I know a good solution to all these problems. My parents have created a marine

conservation centre in Lombok, Indonesia. My parents scuba dive and teach people how to try to save you. And they aren't the only ones. All around the world people are waking up to your suffering and more and more of them are trying to fight for you. If everybody else can start doing the same thing then maybe we stand a chance. Maybe we can beat back climate change, and pollution, and over exploitation, and the continual destruction of your most marvellous creations. And you, my ocean, will be protected and safe. People need to step in and take responsibility to stop all these disasters before we fall over the edge and can't turn back. Because you are such an amazing and wondrous thing and deep inside us we all love every shade of life you hold in your depths.

The world under your big blue waters is beautiful and fantastic beyond any measure I know of. I can't wait to visit you again. To dive into the wonders that hide within you and learn all I can of you. And I hope, with everything I have, that there is still time to know you.

But most of all, my dear, dear, ocean, I wish to thank you. For everything that you are, and everything that you are, to me.

Wolf Sayers

# The King

Picture caption: Watercolour painting of a male black-maned lion by Robbie Cheadle.

AFRICA

YouTube video of The King: <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/foIV9Vq2h5A>



## To a Lion (contemporary poem)

Large, graceful, King of the Beasts

Oh Tau, how you inspire respect and fear<sup>1</sup>

Do not view me with suspicion

I am a champion of the natural world

A supporter of your rights

\*\*\*

Mankind's disgraceful disregard

For this planet's natural bounty

Causes me much sorrow

I understand your distrust

Of me, and everything I represent

Eish, Tau, it breaks my heart<sup>2</sup>

\*\*\*

On rare occasions, you'll kill a human

But that's due to the complete ignorance

Of tourists who don't understand

That wild means ... well, wild

And that's not the same as tame

Or even trained

\*\*\*

You defend your territory; pace the boundaries

Together with your brother in arms<sup>3</sup>

Little do you realise that even that privilege

Is not yours to control

It is dispensed at the discretion of the men

Who decide your future

You've seen your peers shot – their heads stuffed and mounted  
Victims of canned hunting<sup>4</sup>  
Perpetrated by fools who do not appreciate your beauty  
Or the vital role you play  
In the maintenance of the African ecosystems  
And all it's amazing creatures

\*\*\*

Now, you are experiencing the effects of climate change  
A situation to which you have not contributed  
But you will pay the price, innocent or not  
There is no justice  
In this man-made world of materialism  
Which runs on greed and a hunger for power

\*\*\*

But Lion, be assured, you do not suffer alone  
The sins of the people will return to them a hundred times over  
Destroying their safe lives  
Bringing the promised fire and brimstone  
To destroy the wickedness  
In the new Sodom and Gomorrah<sup>5</sup>

\*\*\*

Still Lion, you are better off than me  
I must live with my awareness and knowledge  
Wallow in the guilt of my contribution  
To the waste, pollution, and defilement  
You will die in blessed ignorance  
While I - I will watch the end approaching

\*\*\*

Note 1 – Tau means lion in Setswana.

Note 2 – Eish is a South Africanism which is used to express a range of emotions from surprise to annoyance or resignation.

Note 3 – Male lions travel in pairs, usually two brothers.

Note 4 – Canned hunting is a trophy hunt which is not a ‘fair chase’ as the animals are kept in a confined area and are often feed by their keepers.

Note 5 – Sodom and Gomorrah were two cities destroyed by God for their wickedness in the Abrahamic religions.

## About ‘To a Lion’

This poem is based on “To a Mouse” by Robbie Burns. You can listen to a lovely and authentic reading of this poem here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LA55FrrhEDk>

I included some local colloquialism and language in this poem, hence the notes to the poem.

YouTube video of a male lion stretching: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGq6pBK70KU>





## In Touch With Nature – The vulnerable life of male lions

Lions live in groups called prides. Each pride is comprised of related lionesses and one or more adult male lions will also be present with the dominant male being the pride leader. Female lionesses are loyal to their pride and not to their family members, and this often means that they don't keep related males in their pride.

Male lion cubs are frequent victims of snake bites, hunting hyenas, and male lions that aren't their father or uncle. One in two male lion cubs will die in their first year of life. The greatest single cause of male lion mortality in the first year of life is infanticide by unrelated male lions.



*Picture caption: Lion cubs at Ukutula Lodge & Game Reserve*

At approximately three years of age, male lions are pushed out of their pride by their fathers. Alternatively, they may be forced to leave the pride when a new coalition of male lions takes over the pride. For a period of two or three years after leaving their prides, young male lions wander on their own, trying to avoid confrontation with older, stronger male lions. Frequently, single males find other males of a similar age and join them to form a coalition. Coalitions typically comprise of two to four male lions and are often made up of brothers or cousins although some include unrelated males. The main purpose for male lions forming coalitions is to compete with other male lions for mates.

When the males in a coalition reach four to five years of age, they will challenge other male coalitions for access to a pride of lionesses. When a new coalition takes over a pride, the new males seek out and kill the cubs of other males or drive them away. The purpose of the killing of cubs is to accelerate the return of the lionesses to a reproductive state

thereby allowing the new males to raise their own cubs. The dominant male or pride leader generally gets first mating rights, but lionesses do mate with other pride males. The lesser males usually get their opportunity when several females are in heat at the same time and if the dominant male loses interest while the lionesses are still in heat.



Mature lioness



Young male lion



Mature male lion

The dominant male is usually the largest, strongest male lion. Dominant males usually only retain that position for a few years and then they are challenged by a younger male or an outside coalition. During their time as pride leader, the male is responsible for defending the females and their cubs from predators such as hyenas.

When a battle for leadership takes place within an existing pride, the battle is usually fierce but not deadly. If an outside coalition challenges the leader, the battle will be to the death.

#### **EDITORS NOTE:**

These pieces of work by Robbie Cheadle are indeed very engaging, they take me back to the 1970s when I was employed as the Head Keeper of Lions at the Edinburgh Zoological Park run by the Scottish Zoological Society.

Before I worked there the lionesses and cubs were put out in their (public viewing area) enclosure without the male, because of the risk putting the male out with them might pose. I decided that the risk was very low and allowed the family out in the enclosure together as a group. This was successful, and since then the whole family can be seen as in nature as a happy family unit.

Indeed, the Lion family (*Panthera leo*) are the most wonderful creatures and every time you stroke a domestic cat you might think them very similar. Please don't, many an experienced animal keeper or visitor to a safari park has learnt that the Lion is very much a wild beast and quite capable of tearing you limb from limb.

## Brothers, a 99-syllable Double Ennead poem by Robbie Cheadle



*Picture caption: Two lion brothers resting in the shade*

Dry, yellow grass stretches  
To the horizon  
Just there, under a scrub tree, lie two brothers  
Within slumbers embrace  
They soak up the sun

\*\*\*

The colour of ripe wheat  
They blend with the bush  
Male lions resting peacefully  
Enjoying blissful dreams  
Concerning fat buck

\*\*\*

One starts gently stirring  
Rolls over and sighs  
His underbelly unintimidating  
But then he yawns widely  
Showing great long teeth

From Lion Scream by Robbie Cheadle

Video of lion brothers walking in the road at Pilanesberg National Park:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mT6FnaPc5NU&t=3s>

## Want a new house? By Esther Chilton

When I was young, I didn't think anything of it when a new housing estate appeared. I thought *how lovely, people are going to have nice houses to live in*. I didn't stop to think about the impact on the environment, or the wildlife whose homes were being destroyed. My eyes are now firmly wide open and each time I hear of new houses being built, I cringe. And they're popping up everywhere.

According to UK GBC, 25% of our emissions can be directly attributed to the built environment. Furthermore, they argue that 80% of buildings which will be occupied in 2050 already exist. So surely decarbonising existing stock should be a major priority? But the government's focus is still on creating new homes.

The Wildlife Trusts argue that it is possible to integrate nature into the built environment, but sadly opportunities to do this are often ignored. They say: 'We have lost 97% of our beautiful lowland meadows in England and Wales since 1930. And the loss goes on. Recent reports show that over the last fifty years, 56% of our wild plants and animals have declined, and 15% are at risk of disappearing from our shores altogether. Much of this loss has been due to intensive agriculture, but built development continues to be a major contributor - often unnecessarily.'

So what is the impact of this? Little space left for wildlife and disrupted ecological processes. We have seen this in documentaries highlighting how farmland has become less hospitable to wildlife, and in our towns and cities, gardens and natural spaces have been converted into buildings. It's not sustainable for nature and it also has an impact on us as well as our neighbourhoods.

The Wildlife Trusts propose that, 'Developments don't have to squeeze out wildlife. The benefits are clear: trees in urban areas improve the view, aid privacy, provide shade and help reduce pollution and flash flooding; community green spaces bring people together; and local parks and woods are valuable places for people to walk, play and unwind in.'

How can this be achieved? An important factor is location, to choose areas with an already established infrastructure and one that causes minimum harm to the existing environment. This will require planning and identification of natural features and habitats currently in place. The trusts' vision is for these to exist alongside new habitats in areas where ecosystems need to be restored and to help wildlife recover.

The design of the housing developments and also the houses themselves is another crucial factor. The Wildlife Trusts see the need for space for both wildlife and people, for their well-being but also as a way to reduce carbon emissions and to ensure water usage is minimised.

Can this be a reality, or will it fall by the wayside like many environmental proposals?

To see what a nature-rich housing development looks like, follow the link: [https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2018-05/homes\\_for\\_people\\_and\\_wildlife\\_lr\\_-\\_spreads.pdf](https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2018-05/homes_for_people_and_wildlife_lr_-_spreads.pdf)



## **Are You Thinking about Becoming a Forager? By Alethea Kehas USA**

A September fog veiled the views as I climbed Mt. Uncanoonuc in New Hampshire and discovered my first clusters of Bear's Head Tooth fungi. You would have thought I had won the lottery!

Foraging for wild edibles, such as fungi, can be a wonderful adventure, but there are some rules that should be followed along the way. Enthusiasm should always be balanced with practicality and wisdom. These days, knowledge is mere a click away, but be sure you know your sources.

When I started foraging for fungi nearly two years ago, I began by taking walks with a friend who was an expert at identifying more than a handful of the common edible mushrooms in our region. She introduced me to a reputable Facebook group devoted to helping others safely forage for and identify fungi in NH, and we spent a day learning from a seasoned forager before I consumed my first wild mushroom.

Since then, I've taken a workshop with a certified teacher, watched countless instructional videos, and consulted various guides to expand my knowledge of wild edibles. Still, I proceed with caution before I consume anything I find.

Here is my advice to get started on a journey into the world of foraging for wild edibles:

1. Choose one species that is easy to identify, and build from there.

2. Become familiar with how to ID your species through smell, texture, and visual characteristics using reputable guidebooks and local foraging experts. Consider taking some workshops taught by certified foraging teachers.
3. Research toxic look-alikes and become familiar with how to discern your edible from the poisonous varieties.
4. When you are 100% certain you know your edible, learn how to best prepare it (almost all fungi, for example, should be cooked thoroughly and some should not be consumed with alcohol).
5. When you are ready to forage for your edible, make sure you are searching in a public area that allows foraging and is not sprayed with chemicals. Do not take more than you need, and always leave plenty for the local wildlife.
6. When in doubt about what you have found, toss it out.
7. Learn how to collect your wild edible without harming the rest of the plant, or fungal network, as well as the surrounding ecosystem.
8. When you are ready to eat your edible, prepare it safely and start with just a couple of bites. Wait a day or so to see how your body responds, and build from there (you may find you have an intolerance, or even allergy).
9. Know your local poison control number in the event you have a reaction.
10. When you have mastered your first wild edible, proceed to another.
11. Have fun! Foraging for wild edibles is a great way to get out in nature, learn about your local environment, and discover new foods that may have wonderful benefits for your health.



## **ON THE FRONT LINE** by Steve Shelley **AFRICA**

Running his 30,000 acre Ol Maisor Ranch, Martin Evans faces some intriguing dilemmas. Indeed, his entire business plan revolves around a series of largely unpredictable and unsustainable variables. For a start, it's located in northern Kenya where warring pastoralist tribes are continually on the lookout for grazing. Armed livestock raids come from the Samburu to the east and the Pokot to the west. The presence of police and army does little to deter them because, in part, they are politically sponsored.

This region of Laikipia and the northern rangelands is a mosaic of mostly foreign owned ranches and conservancies, a legacy of the officer settlement scheme that followed the First World War. It's a colonial relic, and owners feel they are under threat. Yet it is their custody of these wild lands that has enabled the preservation and protection of one of the country's last vast wildlife refuges. Here, you'll find populations of rare and endangered species such as reticulated giraffe and Grevy's zebra.

By agreement through the Laikipia Wildlife Forum, landowners have taken down many of their fences in order to keep migration routes open. But this presents another challenge. Elephants damage crops and lions prey on cattle. While that's a downside to Ol Maisor's farming activities, these animals roaming free in this pristine wilderness exert a powerful draw for adventurous tourists who can find their way to this off-the-beaten-track location.

Another issue Martin and his team face is climate change. Always an arid area, rainfall has become less frequent but more intense. Adapting to this means devising ways of keeping the water on site rather than letting it run off. This entails some creative design of swales and dams, kept within certain dimensional limits to avoid taxation by the local county government who claim they have rights to the rainwater.

I drove up to Ol Maisor from Nanyuki, through the heart of this conservancy country, passing Ol Jogi, El Karama, Mpala, Sosian and Suyian. There was traffic: British army Land Rovers pushing up the dust. Nanyuki is the base for BATUK, a British army training unit through which all new recruits pass. This is another post-colonial oddity. Army units have long been deployed to maintain peace in this far northern region of Kenya. But now they offer Martin another source of income. They rent a part of Ol Maisor for live firing exercises. And they pay in sterling.

It seems incongruent, though, to find white faced troops plying this region of wilderness and wildlife. But needs must. At least that revenue stream doesn't dry up with the climate. And their presence acts as some deterrence to the cattle raiders.

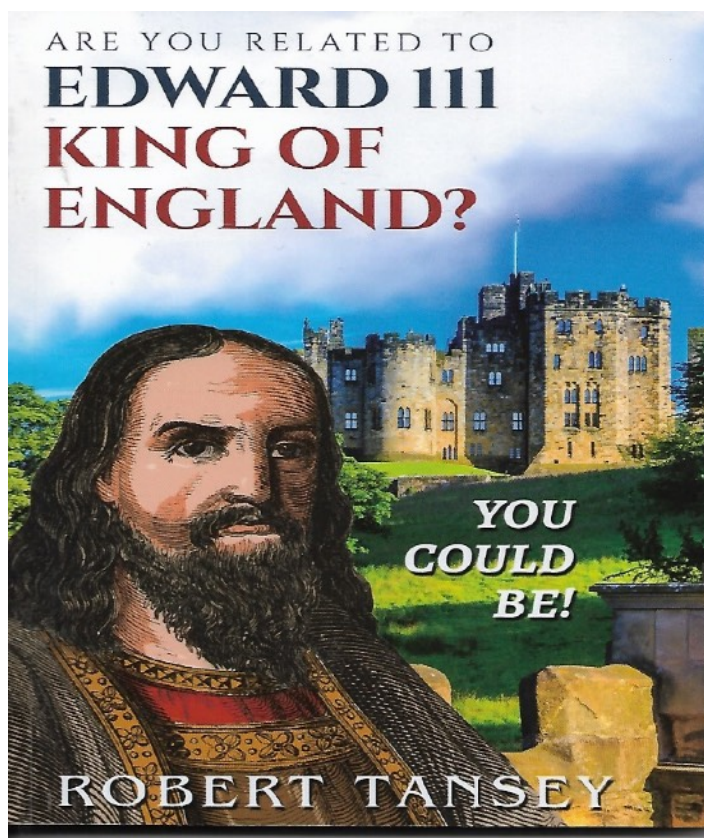
Such is day to day life on the front line of conservation and climate change.

Post Script: Since writing this, Kenya has suffered some of the heaviest rains in its history, thanks to a combination of global warming and the El Niño effect. Ol Maisor enjoyed a bumper harvest – but they can't get it to market because of flooded roads.



## MEMBERS' BOOKS

This section is for our members published non-fiction books, we invite all our members to submit an image of their book with an ISBN number and details of where and how to purchase copies. Please only submit details of non-fiction books we can't accept fiction books.

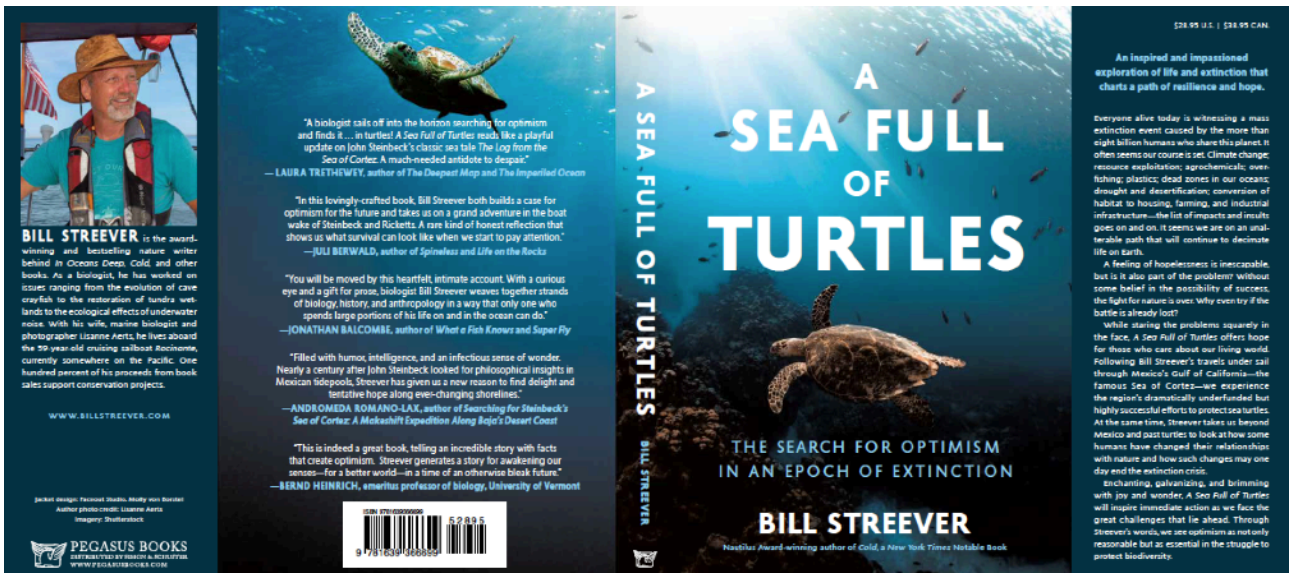


This is my search for my ancestors, through the use of ancestry organisations, lots of investigative work, reading of wills and my son's ability to see how our family is related to many of Britain's ancient rulers and their families. This book will interest followers of the 'WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE' television series (UK). A quest anyone can join.

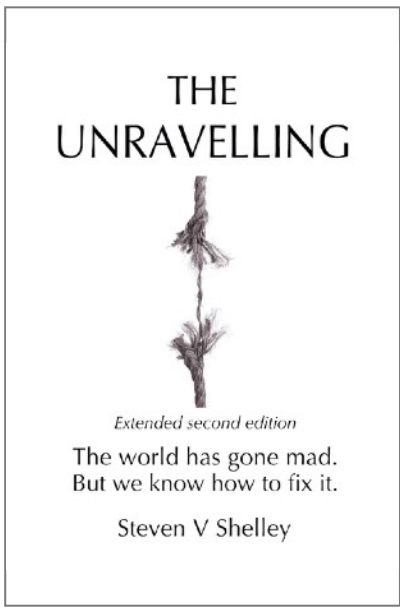
ISBN number: 9781916201491

£7 per copy from the 'GREAT BRITISH BOOKSHOP' on-line

<https://www.thegreatbritishbookshop.co.uk>



Member Bill Streever has a new book coming out this July and is wondering if anyone is up for reviewing or otherwise helping to promote it. Please let us know and we'll pass on any offers or suggestions.



Steve Shelley's new book is now live on Amazon. It charts the nature of the 'poly crisis' engulfing the world, explaining that climate change and loss of nature are just two elements in a much bigger picture. In trying to spin some positivity, Steve tackles the problem in three stages: the symptoms, a diagnosis and a proposed cure.

He uses Paul Levy's concept of a 'mind virus' to explain the madness we're seeing and embraces imagination, creativity and reconnecting with nature as part of a healing process.

The e-book can be downloaded from this link: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0D154PBRD>

# BEAVERS CAN CO-EXIST WITH OUR HUMAN POPULATIONS

By Dr Robert Tansey F.L.S., M.B.N.A. **UK**

Beavers have only come to be seen by members of the British Public in the last few years. For it is only recently that we have come to learn that these magnificent rodents are good for our existence. For many years now with the advent of climate change we have seen extensive flooding in towns and villages where rainfall has grown. Our newspapers are full of these dreadful stories of people's homes being overcome with overflowing rivers and water outlets. People living in properties previously unaffected by floods are finding they can't get insurance to cover their losses. Sewage is another serious problem that the authorities appear to have failed to get to grips with.

Beavers are well known as mammals of Britain until hunters took them all in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were hunted for their fur, meat, and castoreum. The fur trade relied on them for their pelts. Their by-products were even used in gentlemen's top hats and perfumes.



Castoreum is a liquid substance produced by the beaver's urethra-based castor sacs. This substance is secreted to mark their territory by marking its boundaries. The pelts or skins were dried as deer skin is and made into Coats and Hats. In Canada the trade continues as licensed hunters are permitted to kill so many beavers, since their numbers are not at risk or on any endangered species lists. In Europe the beavers were never totally exploited as they were in Britain. So, there are still many pockets in various parts of Europe, but conservation regulations ensure the species is safe. Hunting is permitted in some areas.

In Britain we have released many pairs of Beaver adults usually in controlled situations, where their habitats can be maintained and observed. But as the public have become more aware of them, so have escapees started breeding out-with the confines of their former zoo like enclosures. There are also now beavers on many river systems of Britain and in due course this mammal will be a common and welcome sight to many of us.

There are two species of beaver, the Eurasian beaver (*C.fiber*) and the North American beaver (*C.canadensis*) both species are in the British Isles. In Europe they are mainly Eurasian, with a couple of small pockets of North American ones imported.



### **A dam constructed by Beavers in North America**

Beavers live in lodges built of tree branches, mud and vegetation and rocks. They build dams to divert the water to where they want it, to develop deep pools, their activities create wetlands, and encourage bio-diversity. In short their activities allow for waterflow to be offset, to spread the water over land and help prevent overflow in restricted water channels. They, even out the natural water flow and help prevent flooding.

They are not a friend of landowners whose land has been over the centuries been reclaimed, and the waterways have been strictly controlled. Today's, rivers are not as nature intended and as such prone to more flooding as our rainfall grows in specified periods. Builders continue to build on land that was previously a flood plain, and then wonder why the houses they recently built are far from flood safe. It's clearly greedy builders and landowners that are in the main guilty of such floods, but they expect society to put in flood measures to prevent such. All, so they can keep their profits. Local officials support them by granting planning permission where local people oppose them.

It's high time that those in authority listened to local people who want to live in safe and secure homes. When locals know housing development is about to take place in areas where flooding has occurred, why do the authorities take no notice of them. Warnings are ignored time and time again, permissions are given, the result flooded new housing why? Because those in authority don't in the main care, or is it back handers take place to get the planning consents?



**Eurasian Beaver**



**Evidence of Beaver Activity**

## **AGENCY AND ACTIVISM by Babette Gallard AFRICA**

Dr Ferrial Adam is the Executive Manager of WaterCAN, a network of activists committed to providing clean and safe water to South Africa's citizens. Her name is cited in various news articles, and I've heard her speaking on numerous radio shows, particularly since we've all been experiencing water loss for days on end. Ferrial and I agreed to meet in a nearby café. I got there first and ordered a cappuccino, which came with a free hot cross bun. When she arrived five minutes later, I offered her the same, but she declined. "It's Ramadan." But even on an empty stomach, Ferrial is a tiny dynamo of energy and a phenomenal multitasker who can send texts while also seeming to focus 100% on me.

My first question is obvious. What is WaterCAN, and how did it start?

**FA** WaterCan was started by [OUTA](#) (Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse) because, before 2022, the government hadn't issued a single water quality report for 10 years. The previous Minister, Nomvula Mokonyane, decided the situation was so bad that the reports shouldn't be published, but the new minister, Senzo Mchunu, is something else. His first round of reports came out in the year he started, 2022, and the next last year. He's trying to fix a damaged department. He can't create miracles, but he's got a great team in place, and when people say we don't have the skills, I want to point and say, "Look over there."

So WaterCAN started 10 years ago when things were really bad. My PhD was in Activist Citizen Science, as in turning citizen scientists into activists. You know, the old way of engaging with bird watchers or people taking photographs of trees was important. They sent in valuable data, but it didn't involve them in the decision-making. We need to create agency and activism, and that's what WaterCAN is

about. We did our own water tests in the 10 years when no reports were published and we continue to do that now. We work with a laboratory to get cheap kits that we give people so they can do the tests themselves. We need funding and ask for a donation, but they can also be free to people who can't afford them. Then, we ask those people to upload their test results to our [map](#). If it's tap water and it's bad, I'll get an alert. People ask why we don't get alerts for rivers, streams, and beaches. Well, that's because they're so polluted, and we'd be getting alerts all the time.

The testing is the starting point. We test for chemicals, phosphates, nitrates, pH, alkalinity, and hardness to see whether it's good drinking water or not, and then we look at the bacterial side. When people see the results, they're angry and shocked and ask us what they can do, so now we're working on the 10 steps after testing. First, if it's tap water, get another test and don't drink the water, then get your neighbours to test as well. If their tests are bad, you know it's not just your house. Please share this information on your community chats, tell everyone in the area not to drink the water and then alert your municipality. After that, the municipality must get involved, sort out the problem and let everyone know when it's all clear. But then some municipalities won't get involved, so that's where the activism comes in. WaterCAN will push using all the elements of activism to highlight the issue - social media, the media in general and informed public protest.

**BG** Why do some of the municipalities refuse to get involved?

**FA** Often, they are incapacitated and overwhelmed because of a lack of skills and no funds. There's some complacency, too, and frequently, the response is that it's not my responsibility. It's the water department's or the water agencies. There's so much falling apart, and they're chasing their tails, but we keep pushing them. We alert the [Green Scorpions](#), and if things still don't change for the better, we alert the National government because it can't stand by and watch while everything is literally going to shit. We use all avenues, and if the people responsible still don't respond, we go to the Human Rights Commission.

**BG** Do you experience pushbacks from the departments you criticise and focus on?

**FA** Johannesburg City Council, the mayor and Johannesburg Water refuse to take our calls, but we use other avenues, and fortunately, Rand Water is working with us. The City Council has released a strategy, but it's a carbon copy of their previous strategies and doesn't propose any real solutions. So now we're meeting with experts and publishing their views and proposals through social media, so that ordinary people can use that information to campaign and push for what they know needs to be done.

I haven't been threatened yet, but it could happen. WaterCAN ran tests when, for five years, Sasol knowingly polluted the Vaal River system with heavy metals and other cancer-causing substances. We tested in 2022 and found vanadium in the soil, but they have so much money they keep pushing the court case until you get tired, so we've given our evidence to the Green Scorpions. We also know of a mine in Rustenburg that is polluting the water given to the people working there. The

managers issued an interdict against two activists, stopping them from talking about the mine or the pollution. I chased every legal NGO to get help, and one finally did. WaterCAN doesn't have the funds, but we'll see what we can do. The court case has been postponed to May.

**BG** I see the name WaterCAN cropping everywhere, and you manage a huge national network. How big is your team?

**FA** We have three people in the office here in Johannesburg, someone in KZN and another person in the Western Cape, but at least 25 organisations – a mixture of government and research NGOs - test 110 points across the country on a monthly basis. They are all volunteers. We also train in different provinces with different people. Two weeks ago, we worked with the South African National Biodiversity Institute to train traditional health practitioners, Sangomas, because they are at the forefront and have indigenous knowledge. I love that traditional health practitioners ask nature for permission before doing anything in the river or using its plants, but to help these people engage with their local government, they need knowledge and data to negotiate with. We've given them test kits.

**BG** It's an archetypal David versus Goliath story, but there must be some parts you also enjoy.

**FA** Definitely, like the time I met Nomsa, a traditional Sangoma. It was so empowering listening to a woman who told me they never do anything when the water is stagnant. I mean, that's obvious, right? But sometimes we forget that kind of basic knowledge. And then, we went to train high school students in Cape Town, who gave me a whole new perspective on these people's lives. I was there to do the training, but I was learning too. I'm learning all the time.

## **THE LAST WORD**

**Well again it will soon be summer here, and possibly winter where you are, the months either drag or fly by, but always we get a bit older, sadly. But keep being positive, keep your hopes up for the survival of the planet and the human race. We still have not secured funding to upgrade this magazine, perhaps next time. Please all of you think about what you can contribute to this magazine, please give us a few personal stories, or write us an interesting article or two. We still need personal profiles so why not introduce yourself to the rest of the membership. What is your abiding passion for the environment, tell us.**

**Best wishes for now,**

**Robert**