

The Making of My Octopus Teacher

BY SWATI THAYAGARAJAN

My Octopus Teacher follows the wild of the year Craig Foster spent with a wild octopus.

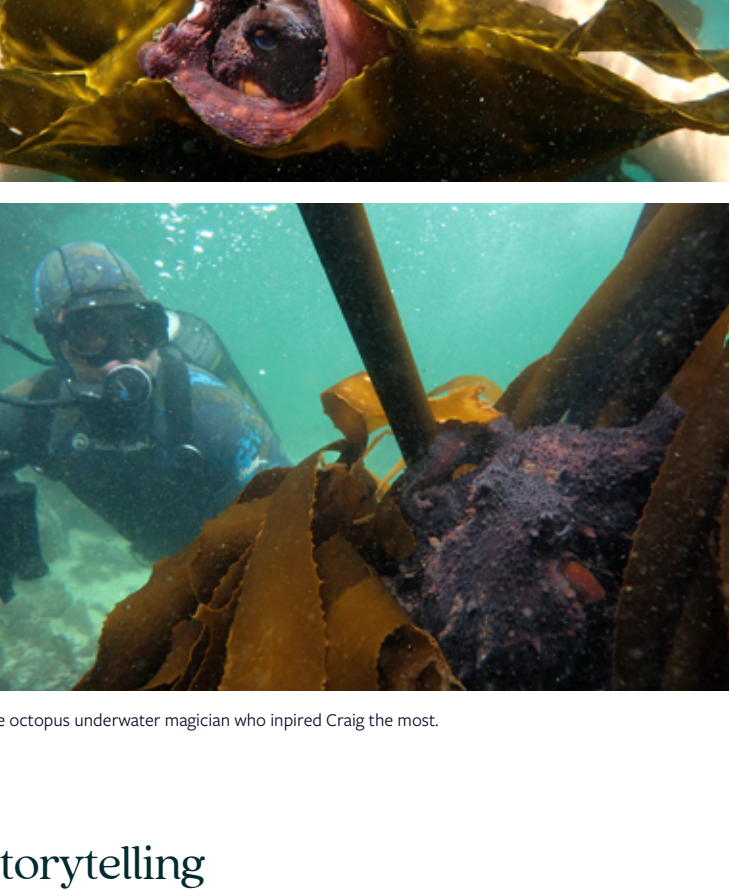
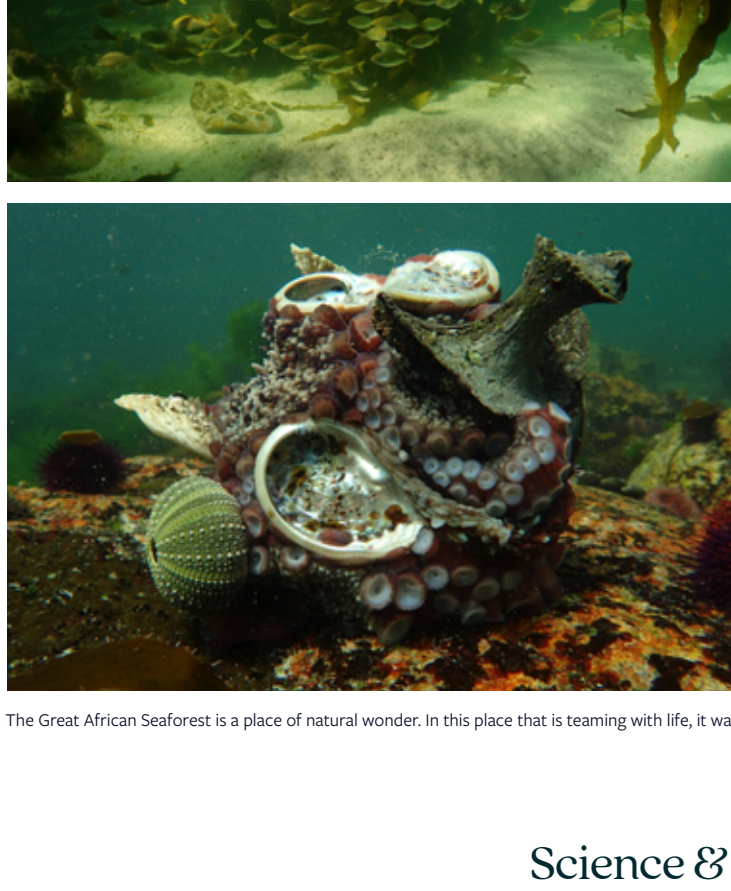
ABOUT THE FILM

Finding the Story

The ocean looked especially lively. White horses rode hard towards rocks while the occasional spinifrid lifted towards the sky. It was one of those days when the South Easter howled down False Bay and anyone with even a modicum of common sense would not attempt a swim. However, there I was on my deck at home, worrying about three people, Craig, Pippa and Roger, who were out there filming Craig in the water.

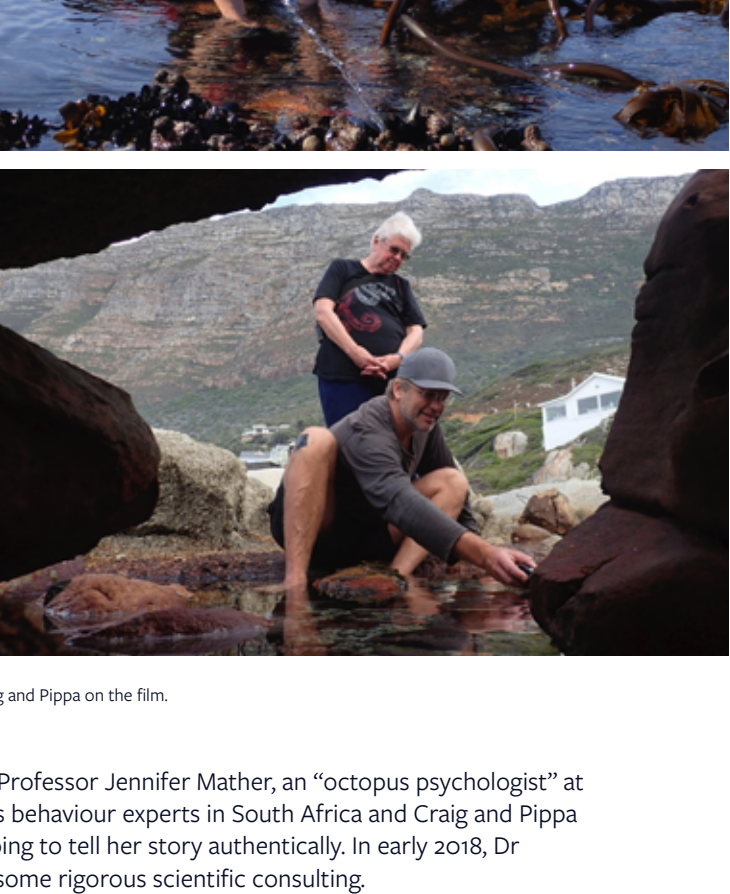
They were not auditioning for a *Survivors* type show, but filming Craig who had made a promise to himself that he would swim in the ocean every single day - no matter what. It was his way of dealing with a deep disconnect from nature and himself, and healing the physical and psychological pain that he was experiencing as a result. It was his happy place, even in moments like this, when the ocean looked like a washing machine.

All three of them are experienced swimmers and divers. They were diving within 100m of the shore, inside the kelp forest that helped to dampen the ocean's ferocity. They were shooting a film titled *My Octopus Teacher*. On this day in 2017, the project was just starting to shape into a film. Its true origin however, began years before when Craig began documenting the wonders of the great underwater forests of Cape Town. A few years into this process he met a very special, wild octopus and started filming her.



Craig was diving every day of the year, often facing bad weather and difficult conditions. Pippa and Roger filming Craig underwater.

For years, Craig dived and filmed alone, but when he started having extraordinary experiences with the octopus, Roger Horrocks, an award-winning camera operator and old friend of Craig's, recognised that there was something very special here. The duo spent hundreds of hours underwater and created a sequence for the BBC's *Blue Planet II*. Craig had been mulling over ideas for a feature film for years, and he suddenly realised that he had a story. Towards the end of the shoot, a young filmmaker called Pippa Ehrlich helped out for a couple of days. Underwater, Pippa was a specialised marine conservation journalist and storyteller who had been diving almost daily with Craig for 6 months. In early 2017 he invited her to help him craft all of his extraordinary underwater experiences into a feature documentary.

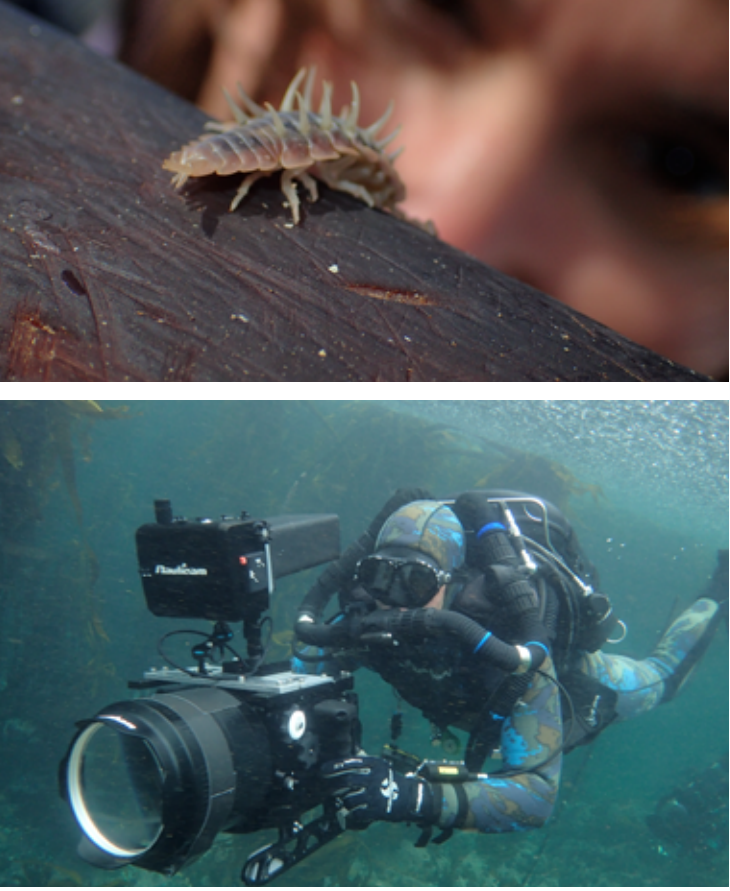


The Great African Seafloor is a place of natural wonder. In this place that is teeming with life, it was the octopus underwater magician who inspired Craig the most.

Science & Storytelling

By the time they started the edit, the octopus had passed away. Their lifespan is only about eighteen months. There were hundreds of hours of footage spanning years of Craig's daily dives in the Seaforest and more recent experiences with octopus. This material required multiple viewings in order to identify a key narrative. It also required extensive scientific input in order to understand all of the complex animal behaviours Craig had captured on film.

The kelp forest, or Great African Seafloor, is a giant underwater forest home to an immense biodiversity and abundance of marine life. Over years of diving and exploring the intertidal zone, Craig had become a kind of citizen scientist, under the mentorship of Emeritus Professor Charles L. Griffiths of the Marine Biology Department at the University of Cape Town. In time, the Professor's young PhD student, who has now graduated, Dr. Janes Landschoff started to work alongside Craig, helping him identify, classify and collate all of the animals and behaviours he was observing. Craig was doing something unique. Unlike a lot of scientists, he was in the ecosystem every day and was taking photographs and videos of everything he saw. It wasn't rigorous scientific research, but it was immensely helpful in providing proof of certain observations and hypotheses, and in identifying new species and documenting animal behaviour.



Craig spending increased amount of time in the field with Charles and Janes. Dr. Jennifer Mather from the University of Lethbridge, Canada, came to South Africa to work with Craig and Pippa on the film.

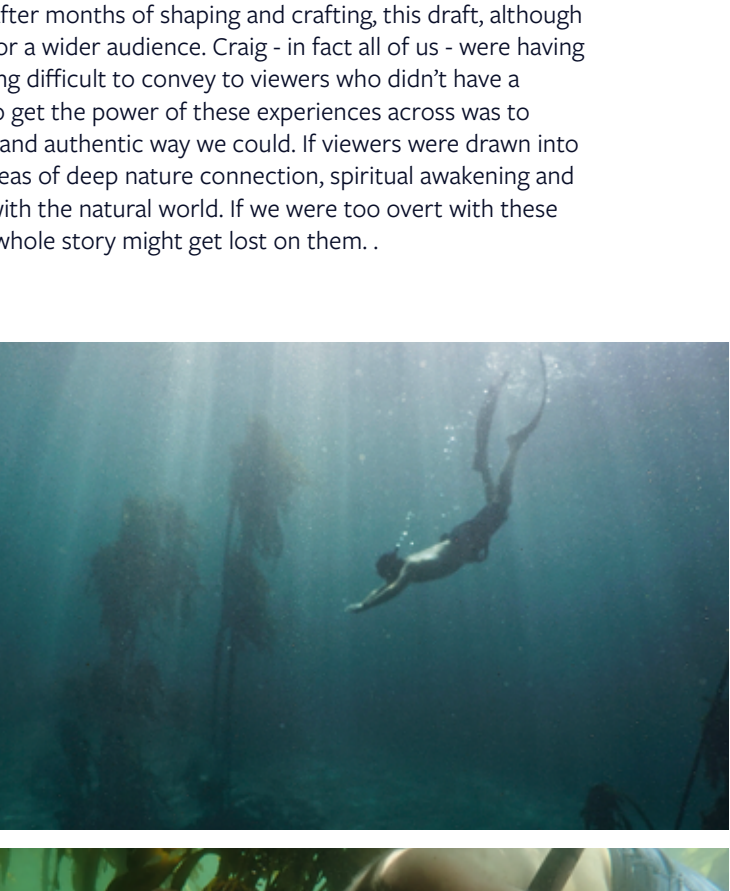
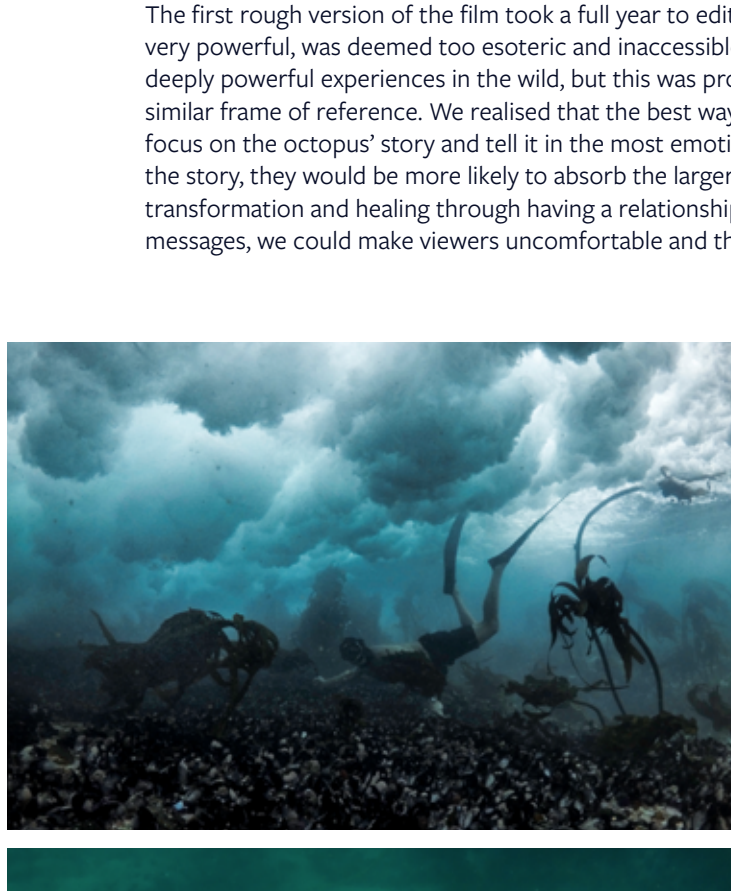
A year into the edit, Craig was excited to get in touch with Professor Jennifer Mather, an "octopus psychologist" at the University of Lethbridge, Canada. There are no octopus behaviour experts in South Africa and Craig and Pippa needed to get into the mind of the octopus if they were going to tell her story authentically. In early 2018, Dr. Mather flew to Cape Town and joined them in the edit for some rigorous scientific consulting.



Getting the Shots

This ecosystem is filled with tiny to medium-sized creatures who are mostly hiding from bigger predators that live in the forest. It's not easy to find the animals you are trying to film. This is why Craig has spent years developing a system of underwater tracking, which allows him to find even the most cryptic creatures - including an 8-armed, shape-shifting, almost invisible cephalopod. Pippa spent months learning to track octopuses with Craig.

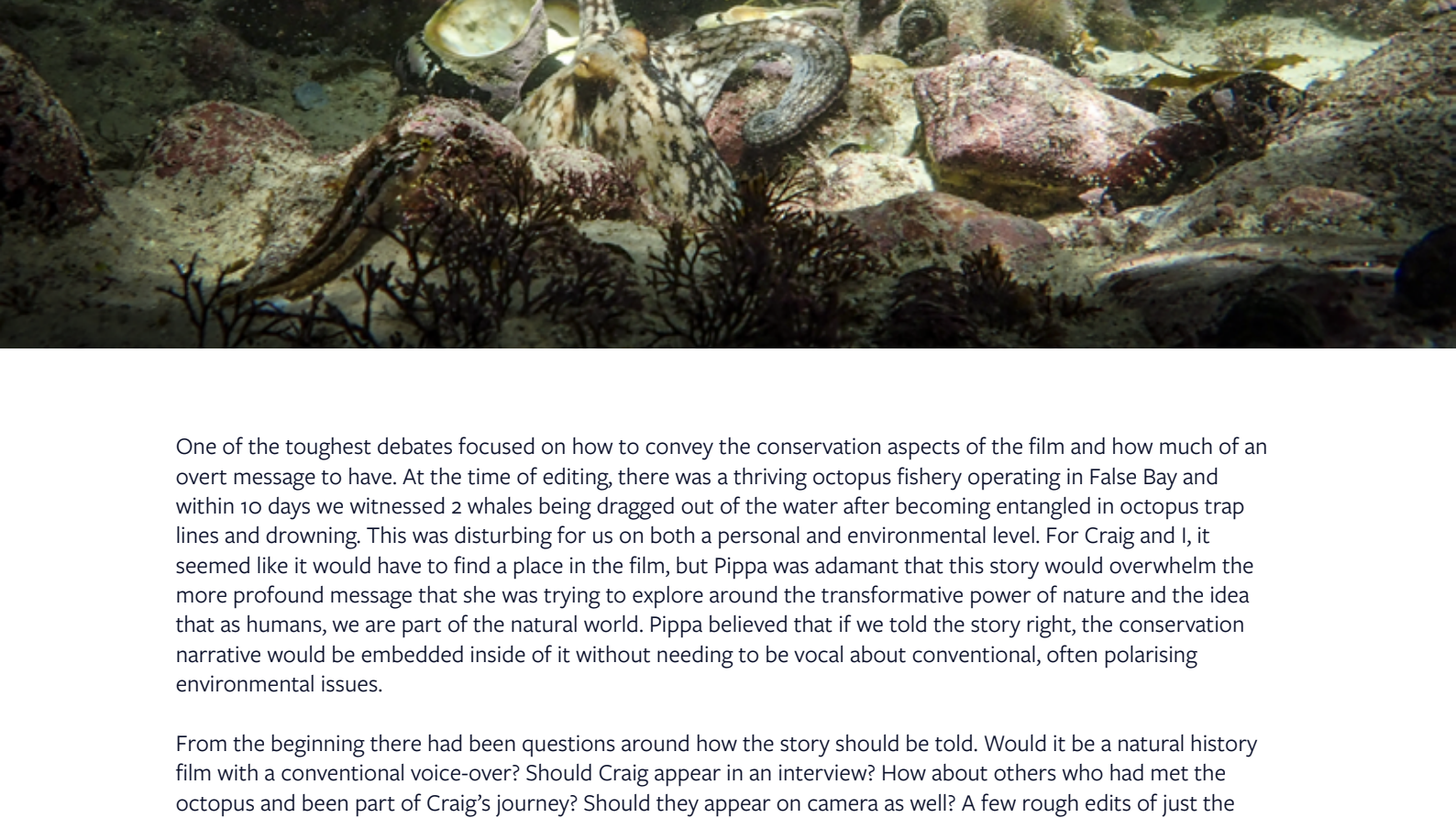
A lot of the action and behaviour takes place in relatively shallow water. Filming requires careful movement and certain animals, you need to get into tiny spaces. For many shots, this precludes the use of camera rigs used in most natural history filmmaking. Using smaller gear also meant that Craig could shoot without scuba and not use a wetsuit. Over years of daily diving he has adapted his body to cope with the cold. Pippa had also trained her body in this way and all of the filming that they did together involved no wetsuits or scuba gear. This meant that Pippa was having a fully immersive experience the entire time she was directing and editing the film. The incredible, cinematic material shot by Roger on a RED Dragon with all of the usual filming equipment required for a big-camera setup.



Following Craig's underwater tracking technique, paying attention to detail was very important to Roger and Pippa.

Apart from some incredible shots with Roger, Craig was on his own during most of his time with the octopus. For certain shots he was able to place the camera on the seafloor and capture their interactions, but at the time he was not thinking of creating a feature doc, so these shots were precious and rare and are certainly some of the most powerful scenes in the film. To tell the rest of the story, he needed to focus on the shore of the seaforest. The beginning of the film was debated and scrutinised and recut over and over again - far more than any part of the story.

On a couple of special occasions when the water clarity was especially good, or to film Craig with the seals, Roger came out with his RED. Additional material was also required to showcase the kelp forest itself: generic shots of the Seaforest, other animals and their behaviour and highly specialised long lens shots.



As the story took shape, we realised that Tom's relationship with Craig would be a very important part of it. As when Craig was struggling initially with exhaustion, disconnect and depression, he was worried about his ability to be a good father to his son. This was a big motivation for Craig to begin his ocean immersion. He got himself right. Underwater, these scenes were filmed by Pippa and by Warren Smart, a very talented and creative topside cinematographer who came on board to create shots on land that felt like they were happening underwater.



Crafting the Story

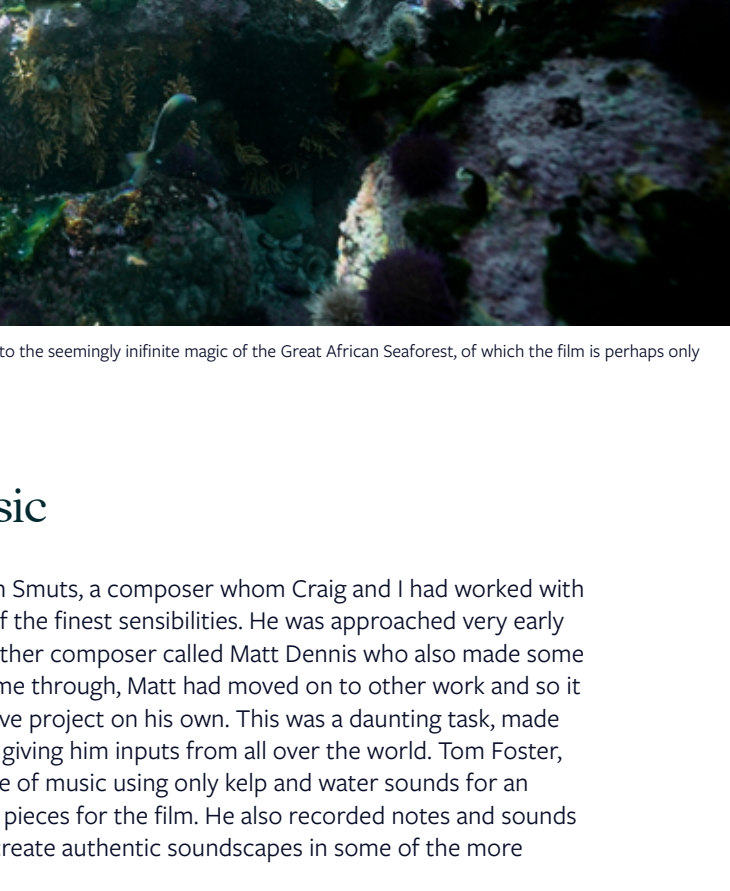
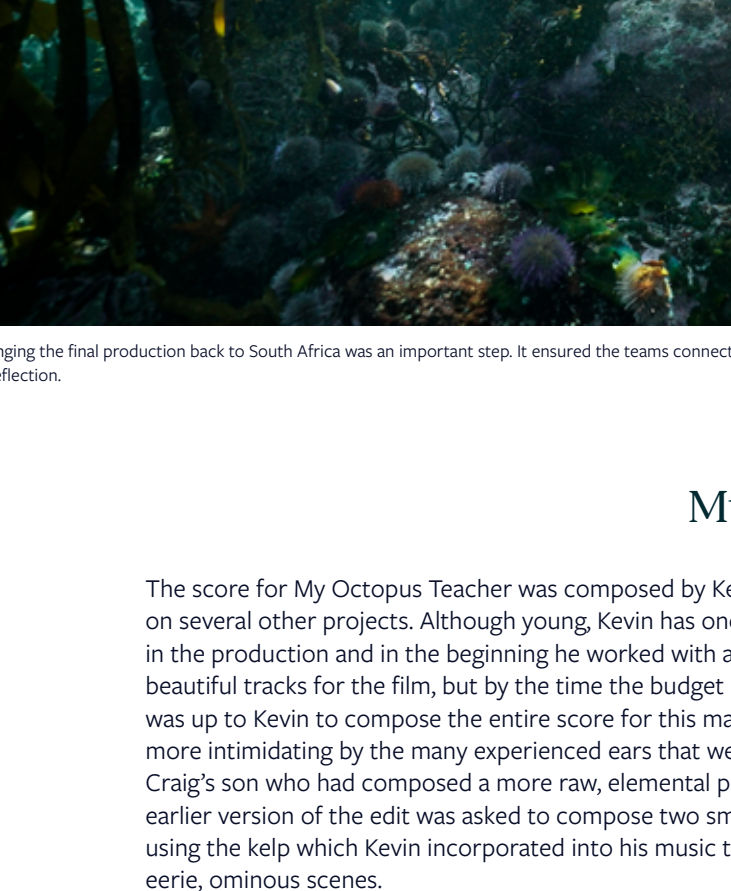
With many terabytes of footage to sift through, a plethora of potential narrative threads and the complicated life histories of two very different species to weave into one story, getting the narrative right was a daunting task. This was when Pippa stepped in with a critical eye and her gift for telling stories.

Daily debates that went on well into the night between Craig, Pippa and I became normal. There were so many angles and dramatic moments and complex back stories that it was hard to find one cohesive thread. Most importantly, where did the story begin? Was it with the San people who first introduced Craig to tracking and the wonders of what deep nature connection actually meant? Was it during Craig's childhood on the shore of the seaforest? The beginning of the film was debated and scrutinised and recut over and over again - far more than any part of the story.

Many beautiful sequences were cut and discussed and reworked and eventually discarded because despite being fascinating, they were not part of the core narrative. The story of Craig and the octopus. It was her who had drawn him deepest into the underwater world and the invisible "mind" of nature. She was his "Octopus Teacher".

Craig's became excited about the project. Ellen Windmuth, Founder of Off the Fence Productions, based in Amsterdam, came on board as Executive Producer. She had played the same role on *The Great Dance*, a hunter's story, Craig's first very successful film. Ellen was a critical sounding board from a creative point of view, and with decades of experience directing several international award-winning projects, she became invaluable to the progress of the project. She also worked closely with Ludo Dufour to find a buyer for the film without which it would have never been completed nor had an audience.

The first rough version of the film took a full year to edit. After months of shaping and crafting, this draft, although very powerful, was deemed too esoteric and inaccessible for a wider audience. Craig - in fact all of us - were having deeply powerful experiences in the wild, but this was proving difficult to convey to viewers who didn't have a similar frame of reference. We realised that the best way to get the power of these experiences across was to focus on the octopus' story and tell it in the most emotive and authentic way we could. If viewers were drawn into the story, they would be more likely to absorb the larger ideas of deep nature connection, spiritual awakening and transformation, we could make viewers uncomfortable and the whole story might get lost on them.



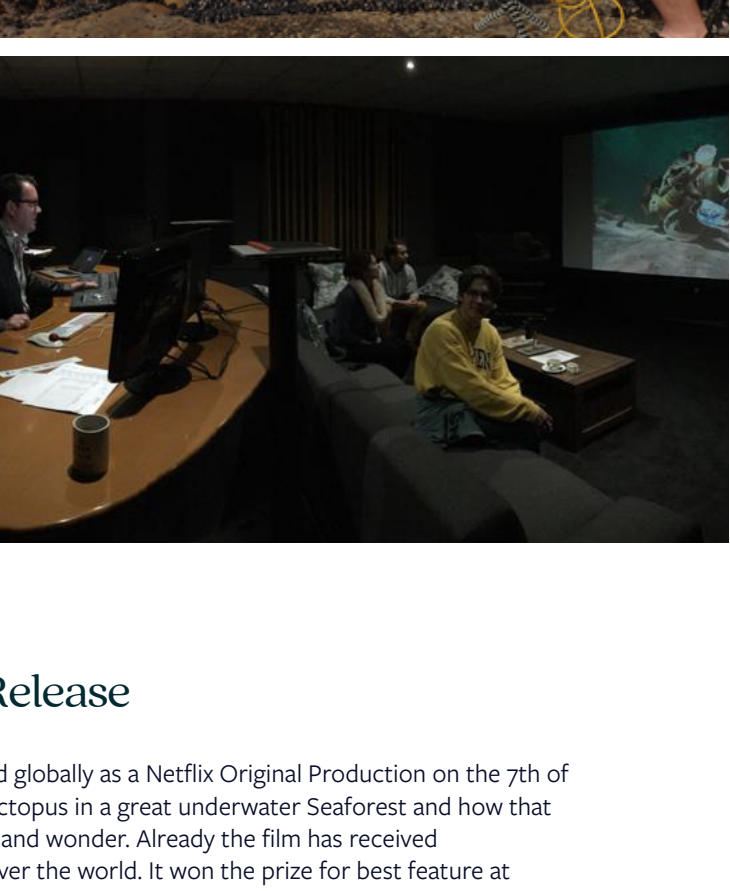
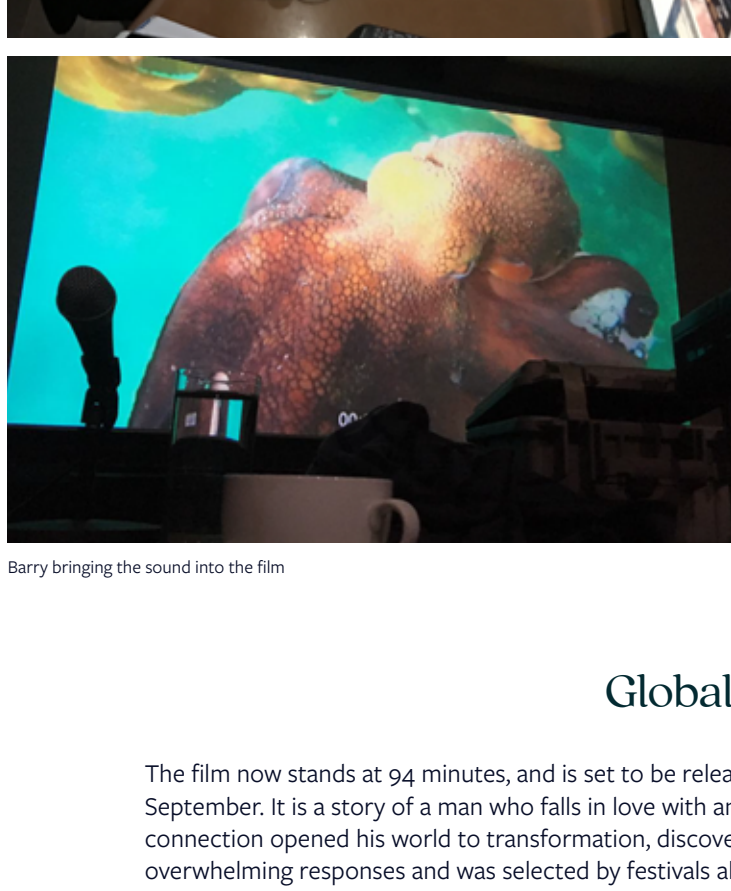
Craig getting down into the octopus world.



One of the toughest debates focused on how to convey the conservation aspects of the film and how much of an overt message to have. At the time of editing, there was a thriving octopus fishery operating in False Bay and within to days we witnessed a whales being dragged out of the water after becoming entangled in octopus trawling and being towed to the shore. This was a big motivation for Craig to begin his ocean immersion. He got himself right. Underwater, these scenes were filmed by Pippa and by Warren Smart, a very talented and creative topside cinematographer who came on board to create shots on land that felt like they were happening underwater.

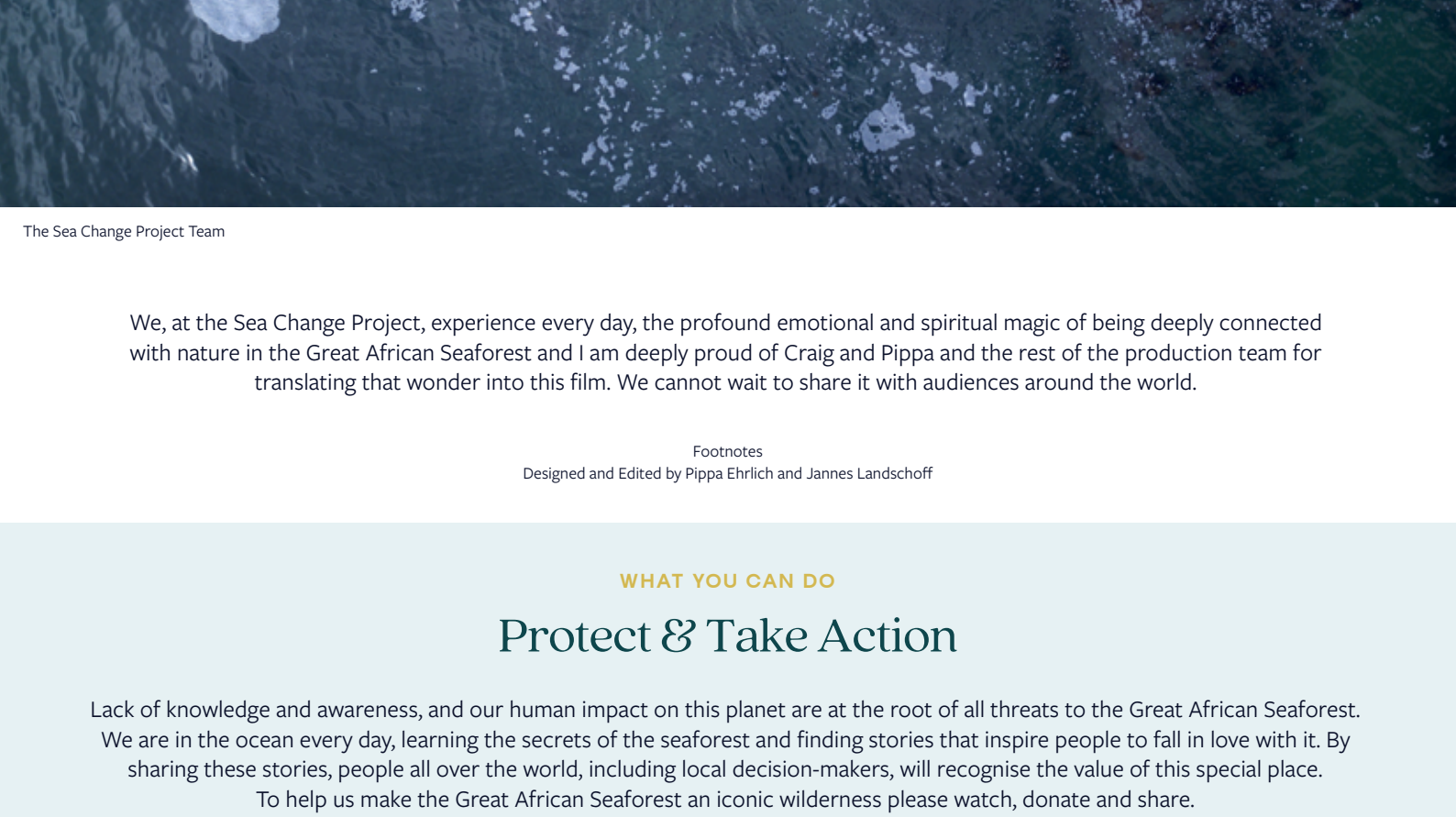
From the beginning there had been questions around how the story should be told. Would it be a natural history film with a conventional voice-over? Should Craig appear in an interview? How about others who had met the octopus and been part of Craig's journey? Should they appear on camera as well? A few rough drafts of just the first minutes made it clear including other characters was both confusing and diluted the story.

For Craig, this was a new experience. He was an experienced filmmaker and had spent thousands of hours behind a camera and while all of his films explore the interface between humans and the wild world, he had never been the subject of his own story. The idea of being on camera as a central character, rather than just narrating in the background was intimidating for him. But slowly he got used to the idea and it seemed more and more important for giving the film an authentic and accessible voice. Pippa tried to interview Craig on a number of occasions, but because she already knew him and the story so well, these interviews just didn't seem to work. Eventually they settled on an alternative approach that involved voice-over with shots of Craig in the story, but never speaking directly to camera. While the narrative was strong and emotive, something just didn't feel right. Without seeing Craig speaking to the camera there was not a deep enough authenticity to the story. We needed an interview, but we knew that Pippa was not the right person to do it.



Ellen (EP), Off the Fence and Sara (SVP, Netflix) experiencing the kelp forest first hand with Pippa and James (Co-directors of the film).

By late 2018, Pippa and Craig had been working for 18 months. Pippa had quit a paying job and taken on this project full time. The team at Off the Fence realised they were too close to the story and needed an objective eye. They approached James Reel, a popular and award-winning filmmaker based in Bristol. He had a knack for telling a story by stripping it down to its essential details. The film was sent to him and we were all very excited when he agreed to come on-board to run an interview with Craig and help to reconstruct the edit around this conversation - a storytelling approach which he has mastered. James came out to Cape Town and collaborating with Pippa in the background, he did a grilling 3-day interview with Craig.



Making the Cut

James then went back to England, accompanied by Pippa and the two of them worked together to completely recut the film using just Craig's interview to tell the story. They were very lucky to have Dan Schwalm, an experienced natural history editor, in the edit suite. Dan and James worked relentlessly to give the film a compelling and contemporary style that immediately pulled the viewer into the story. In early 2019, this new cut landed in the inbox of Sara Edelson, a commissioning editor at Netflix. Sara came on board as Netflix's EP and the film got a new wave of energy with a huge media player behind it.

Once James shaped and gave the film its foundation and flow making it universally appealing, the cut came back to South Africa for a final pass over with Netflix editorial input. The film needed both James's experienced eye and hand and Pippa's more direct daily experiential involvement.

As with any story, editing is a dance. When a story needs to be slowed down and when does it need to speed up? How do tension and relief play in this dance? Ellen and Sara decided to bring on an edit consultant to help. They approached James Reel, a popular and award-winning filmmaker based in Bristol. He had a knack for telling a story by stripping it down to its essential details. The film was sent to him and we were all very excited when he agreed to come on-board to run an interview with Craig and help to reconstruct the edit around this conversation - a storytelling approach which he has mastered. James came out to Cape Town and collaborating with Pippa in the background, he did a grilling 3-day interview with Craig.

Bringing the final production back to South Africa was an important step. It ensured the teams connection to the seemingly infinite magic of the Great African Seafloor, of which the film is perhaps only a reflection.

Music

The score for *My Octopus Teacher* was composed by Kevin Smuts, a composer whom Craig and I had worked with on several other projects. Although young, Kevin has one of the finest sensibilities. He was approached very early in the production and in the beginning he worked with another composer called Matt Dennis who also made some beautiful tracks for the film, but by the time the budget came through, Matt had moved on to other work and so it was up to Kevin to compose the entire score for this massive project on his own. This was a daunting task, made more intimidating by the many experienced ears that were giving him inputs from all over the world. Tom Foster, Craig's son who had composed a more raw, elemental piece of music using only kelp and water sounds for an earlier version of the edit was asked to compose two small pieces for the film. He also recorded notes and sounds using the kelp which Kevin incorporated into his music to create authentic soundscapes in some of the more eerie, ominous scenes.

Later, Ronan Skillen, a master percussionist recorded live radio sequences using his collection of exotic instruments to add to the atmosphere of the soundtrack in key places.

Kevin, Pippa and Craig during the final mix. Tom and the sound of kelp music, and playing percussion on empty mussels with Ronan.

The Finishing Touches

On all of this work was going into the offline edit, the enormous task of the online was also looming. With Netflix on board, the technical demands of a modern media giant had to be met and with so many cameras and formats being used for the film, but by the time the budget came through, Matt had moved on to other work and so it was up to Kevin to compose the entire score for this massive project on his own. This was a daunting task, made more intimidating by the many experienced ears that were giving him inputs from all over the world. Tom Foster, Craig's son who had composed a more raw, elemental piece of music using only kelp and water sounds for an earlier version of the edit was asked to compose two small pieces for the film. He also recorded notes and sounds using the kelp which Kevin incorporated into his music to create authentic soundscapes in some of the more eerie, ominous scenes.

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Global Release

The film now stands at 94 minutes, and is set to be released globally as a Netflix Original Production on the 7th of September. It is a story of a man who falls in love with an octopus in a great underwater Seaforest and how that connection opened his world to transformation, discovery and wonder. Already the film has received overwhelming responses and was selected by festivals all over the world. It won the prize for best feature at EarthX Film and is nominated for a Wildscreen awards and in a whopping 6 categories at Jackson Wild - as well as a number of awards at smaller festivals. I saw firsthand the love, energy and sometimes agony that went into creating this film. Throughout the process, Craig and Pippa were supported by Carina Frankal, Ross Frylinc, Faine Louber and James Landschoff and I of the Sea Change Project. Ross, Carina and I were credited as Associate Producers.

The Sea Change Project Team

We, at the Sea Change Project, experience every day, the profound emotional and spiritual magic of being deeply connected with nature in the Great African Seaforest and I am deeply proud of Craig and Pippa and the rest of the production team for translating that wonder into this film. We cannot wait to share it with audiences around the world.

Designed and Edited by Pippa Ehrlich and James Landschoff

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Protect & Take Action

Lack of knowledge and awareness, and our human impact on this planet are at the root of all threats to the Great African Seaforest. We are in the ocean every day, learning the secrets of the seaforest and finding stories that inspire people to fall in love with it. By sharing these stories, people all over the world, including local decision-makers, will recognise the value of this special place.

To help us make the Great African Seaforest an iconic wilderness please watch, donate and share.

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