

Free your inner wild

We weren't built for domestication and must release our wild side.
Graeme Green is intrigued by the message of a passionate new book



Book
Amphibious Soul
Craig Foster
Thorsons

MY OCTOPUS Teacher won the 2021 Oscar for best documentary and struck a nerve with audiences worldwide. Gently immersing viewers in the underwater world of a golden kelp forest off the coast of South Africa's Western Cape, directors Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed told the story of Craig Foster, a South African film-maker who developed an emotional connection with an octopus, which helped lift him out of a period of depression and burnout.

Foster's new book, *Amphibious Soul: Finding the wild in a tame world*, is part memoir and part manifesto. It expands on the film's central idea that humans have lost their sense of connection to plants, other animals and the environment. This is to the

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detriment of our physical and mental health. "For 300,000 years of human history," he writes, "we lived in accord with nature, as free as any other animal." But the past 10,000 years of settled life, increasingly indoors and separate from each other and nature, was bad for us, leaving "our wild intuition... deeply buried inside".

Foster seems to be an obsessive character. Early on, he admits he is a workaholic, with 16-hour stints in the editing suite costing him his first marriage and threatening his second. While *My Octopus Teacher* suggested a man working through a mid-life crisis, *Amphibious Soul* hints at a longer-running malaise, as Foster seeks solace in nature, even swimming into a crocodile's lair to get a "hit" of wildness.

He is a firm believer in the restorative powers of cold water, not just swimming and freediving without a wetsuit in cold Atlantic waters, but sinking himself in iced water in his freezer, even though it sometimes makes him ill. Despite the debate about the long-term benefits and dangers, Foster is evangelical: daily exposure to cold water and wild animals "lets

the primal mind know it's alive, stimulating and strengthening the immune system".

Inspired by the San hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari desert, Foster also writes about "tracking", a process of looking closely at a landscape and learning to read the signs left by wild animals. He calls himself a nature "detective",

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identifying questions or mysteries, then trying to solve them.

He observes a giant clingfish above the ocean surface moving up towards a limpet clamped onto a rock. "In a fraction of a second, as a large wave cannoned up the rock, the fish grabbed hold of the limpet in its large teeth and twisted its muscular body about a hundred degrees. The clingfish surfed down the rock and in one gulp of its massive mouth swallowed the limpet, shell and all," he writes. "I'd been a witness to the secret

behavior of an air-breathing, wave-surfing superpredator!"

As well as including his own "tracking" photographs in the book and a QR code linking to video clips he has made of his encounters with wildlife, Foster's final chapter helps us explore our local environments. We can, he says, reconnect with nature by revisiting the same spot – whether it is a pond behind our home, a nearby park or a hiking trail – and recording what we see.

Enthusiasm aside, there are flaws. I would have appreciated more context and deeper exploration of the subjects that Foster raises beyond his personal experiences, such as rising levels of anxiety, stress and depression in modern societies, the pitfalls of technology and the benefits of spending time in nature.

Science-minded folks will also raise an eyebrow at Foster's belief that the San can merge their minds and bodies with the animals they track. When his friend and colleague Ehrlich reports she once experienced being inside the consciousness of a southern rock agama lizard, Foster writes: "I knew this was an authentic experience." I am more sceptical. Foster's references to "the wild god within" and our "original mother" also have a whiff of woo-woo about them.

But he is right to argue that our detachment from the natural world is leading us to destroy wildlife and our planet. There is a compelling message at the heart of the book about the benefits of keeping "our curiosity bubbling" and connecting with nature, one likely to prompt readers to consider how to get more wildness into their own lives. ■

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