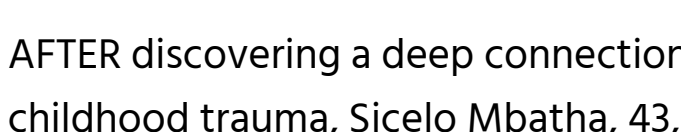




Wilderness guide Sicelo Mbatha from Zululand speaks about how he made a deep connection to the wild, overcoming the trauma of seeing his cousin being taken by a crocodile.

Guiding humans to the peace of the wild

By Tanya Waterworth | Oct 30, 2021



AFTER discovering a deep connection with the wild when overcoming childhood trauma, Sicelo Mbatha, 43, forged a new path in his approach to nature - embracing and sharing the human need for the wilderness to ensure spiritual and emotional survival.

And in a world struggling to overcome the effects of the Covid pandemic, Mbatha's book, *Black Lion - Alive in the Wilderness*, explores the intuitive human connection to nature.



Described as "a brilliant and profound account of his life as a wilderness spiritual guide", Mbatha co-authored the book with environmentalist and writer Bridget Pitt. The pair wrote the book during lockdown.

Speaking to the Independent on Saturday this week, Mbatha who lives in Amatikulu in Zululand, said he has worked as a guide for 24 years, taking many visitors to areas such as Hluhluwe-Imfolozi game reserve, as well as into the Drakensberg.

As a child, he witnessed his cousin being taken by a crocodile, a traumatic event that set the path for his future.

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Growing up in uMfolozi, a young Mbatha was crossing a turbulent river with other children during a heavy downpour. His elder cousin, Sanele, was holding his hand to help him across. Disaster struck when a crocodile grabbed Sanele. All that was found of Sanele was his T-shirt which caught on a log in the river.

For Mbatha, the horror of that day remained with him and when he was training as a young guide at Hluhluwe-Imfolozi game reserve. He and his patrol leader, Induna, came across crocodiles feasting on a buffalo in a mud pool.

"As the buffalo's blood filled the mud hole, turning the grey water to red, one word filled my mind: 'Sanele'," he said.



Induna told Mbatha: "His old life is ending now, but his new life is beginning. The buffalo is at peace, but there are many people alive who have no peace. They may seem successful, but inside they are dying, for they cannot make peace with their past lives. We need to think about what this death for the buffalo can mean for us.

"Just as the buffalo had to die before his new life could begin, so we need to understand that sometimes one part of us has to die to allow a new part to grow. You cannot have the old part and new part living together. The sun and the rain cannot share the sky. For the sun to come, the rain must go," said Induna.

That moment changed Mbatha's life as he pondered his patrol leader's words as they walked back to camp.

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"I understood that I needed to let go of that hatred - for years I had associated crocodiles with fear and brutality - but the crocodile which took Samele was just taking the opportunity to get a meal, it was not acting from cruelty or vengeance. Finally I could accept crocodiles as fellow creatures, even worthy of respect, for they are formidable survivors.

"Our society has forgotten that dying is a rite of passage; what was an emotionally haunting day for me when Sanele was taken, was an ordinary day for the crocodile. It was time to make peace with that."

He said that allowed him to forge a deeper connection to nature.

In 2010, he started his own company "to take people who have suffered trauma into the wilderness. It is something that is needed to cross that boundary and to become more mindful. It's about experiencing harmony, connectedness and oneness, you are really alive when you are in the wilderness".

"Nature will teach your soul to be strong, you need a strong soul to survive. It's not just about going on safari and looking at lions, it's about opening a window, and I introduce the elements. I love it when a person goes back to society as a changed person. I always say, don't thank me, thank the wilderness," he said.

Mbatha is the first person in his family to write and publish a book, and his co-author and conservationist, Bridget Pitt, said: "My dad used to take us to the Berg when I was a child, so that was my first engagement with nature and I developed a strong sense that it was important to spend time in the wild. So, I feel strongly about that connection and our dependency on nature, both physically and emotionally.

"Sicelo has a very rich linguistic way of framing things and very vividly describes his experiences in the bush, he has a fascinating story and an amazing journey.

"After going through the pandemic, this book is important as it reminds us that we can learn from nature, its importance in the world and how we need it to survive," she said.

The book is also being launched overseas and is available on online sites such as Amazon, Loot and Takealot, as well as in Exclusive Books and other good bookstores.

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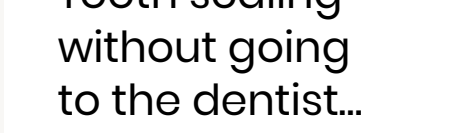
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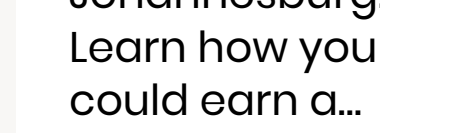
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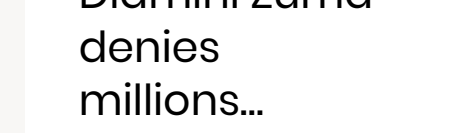
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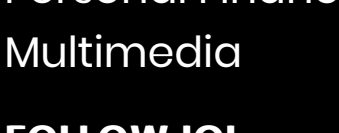
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