

## Unit 3 Nature Connections

### My Octopus Teacher

I returned to the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa, where I had spent my childhood, after over 20 years of movie-making. I went diving in the cold sea off the coast of the Cape, and it was among the dense seaweed forests where I met an octopus.

#### First Encounter

I saw a fish peacefully swimming near a heap of shells. Suddenly, an octopus sprang from the heap and grabbed the fish. Amazed at the cleverness of the octopus, I swam a little closer, but it disappeared. In fact, it had lifted a piece of seaweed, wrapped it around itself, and was staring at me out of a little gap. What an extraordinary creature! I wondered what would happen if I kept watching it. To see the world from the octopus's perspective, I left a camera near the den and started visiting regularly. I even mapped the environment around the den. Expecting some drama to come, I waited.

### Making Friends

The octopus became less scared as I visited more often. After about a month, it came near me. I put my hand out, and it reached out to me. After another week, it started to wave like a human friend saying, "Hi, I'm excited to see you." I kept still, and it covered my whole hand. Since I had to take a breath, I swam toward the surface. To my surprise, it rode on my hand all the way to the top. There I was, just staring into the eyes of this incredible creature. It sparked my curiosity in a way that I had not experienced before. Had I gained its trust? I started reading books about octopuses, but I wanted to learn more about this marvelous creature. The first thing I learned was that "it" was a "she."

## Getting Closer

Danger in the form of pyjama sharks, the area's biggest predators, came with little warning in the sea. The octopus was moving around near the edge of the seaweed forest, and I saw a shark tracking her. In an instant, she swam into a crack to escape, but the shark was faster.

The shark had taken a bite of one of her arms and was waiting for her. I wanted to save my friend, but in this environment, I could only observe. She managed to get deeper into the crack, but she was bleeding. After a while, the shark lost interest, and the octopus used the opportunity to get back to her den, without one of her arms. She was in serious danger because her arms function like the hands, legs, nose, and eyes of humans.

The next day, I was relieved to see that she had survived. She was weak, and her colors were not as bright. I checked on her every day, wondering if that day would be the last. It was emotionally painful to witness these things happening to her.

## Recovery, Growth, and Sacrifice

A short while later, I saw that the wound had healed. To my amazement, a little arm started to grow back, and she started to become active again. I started to compare my life to life in the unforgiving sea. I thought of what was valuable in life. I began to spend more time with my family and friends, and I even started to dive with my young son. He became just as interested in her as I was. As the octopus's arm became more functional, I felt things in my life were improving too.

An octopus's average life is about a year, which ends after reproducing. One day, eight months after meeting her, I found her with another octopus. It was bittersweet knowing her final days were approaching even though she would bear young.

After mating, she didn't come out of her den. There would be no feeding or hunting. She was timing her final moments for the hatching of her eggs. After the eggs hatched, she died. A few months later, my son found a little octopus. We believe her story continues on.

I fell in love with an octopus and the amazing wildness she represented. I built a relationship with her and witnessed her life up to the final moments. I saw her from a perspective that I could not have had without this experience. She was smart, sensitive, and strong, often going through rough and tough days just like humans do. Eventually, she committed herself to protecting the birth of her young before she died. As a human being, I found something noble in that sacrifice. She was not simply an octopus; she was a part of this world just as I am a part of it now, and in that sense, we all have our own stories to tell.