

PERSPECTIVES

At dusk in Kenya some Kikuyu mums still shoo their children indoors with warnings that Muthige, the mysterious black wild dog is coming for those who remain outside in the dark. But these days Muthige is nearly extinct so there is little chance of a rebellious youngster being on the menu. There are other threats though. Hippos and crocodiles attack people fetching water, and elephants and buffalo invade gardens, destroy crops and kill villagers trying to defend their property.

People living under such conditions have what seems an unenviable relationship with nature, an unequal partnership in which they hold little sway. But we in Europe have shown that nature suits us best when we are in control. Our landscape is the product of about two thousand years of intensive management and we have an intimate relationship with nature only in the sense that we have bent it nicely to our requirements. Our wildlife community is defanged, emasculated and consumer-friendly. In Africa nature stands up and bites back.

So does this mean that different peoples have different relationships with nature? On the surface, yes, they vary like all human relationships. Familiarity can breed contempt, or at least indifference, and absence makes the heart grow fonder. But I believe that beneath this veneer of sentiment lies a deep,

instinctive reverence for open spaces, fresh air and wild things. Because of circumstances this spiritual sense can be discounted or overlooked until one realises something is missing.

For example, if you lived in an unadulterated wilderness with wild animals sniffing around the back door you might not see its allure until your space started shrinking and nostalgia set in. Witness the floods of visitors to our national parks and other green spaces. Still unconvinced? Then watch people in Scandinavia trying to save the wolf!

Some people have not yet lost touch with their love of open country. On the coast of Kenya I met a young Masai man, his red cloak flapping in the breeze as he scanned the horizon appreciatively.

"How far is it to the other side?" he said. *He* obviously knew a good space when he saw one. I fudged it and said that it was a long way.

"What's in that direction, then?", pointing straight out to sea with his cane. India was the answer. And had the sea become solid ground, I think he would have set off at once, loping easily across to India with his cows, wife and children in tow, instead of hanging about here watching the Italians.

Afterwards I was with an anti-poaching unit in a Kenyan National Park, watching buffalo rumble across the road. Seen from a car, the buffalo is a marvellous animal - huge, lumpy and black, wickedly curved horns meeting in a dinner-plate sized boss over an indignant gaze. Lowing and snorting, clouded in dust, they smell of manure and mud. Even in retreat they look dangerous.

Patrolling on foot through the crackling grass and spiky grey bushland a few days later, the eagerness to meet buffalo is gone. But even deliberate avoidance might not work according to your mates - the old males grow cantankerous and pursue a solitary lifestyle. Often the crunch of approaching boots is perceived as an irresistible opportunity to ambush and rout the scouts, preferably pranging a few as well. Bloody-mindedness is not just a human trait. A muffled crash - one of the old buggers lumbers off, in the right direction, and everyone smiles with relief - no cultural differences there.

Later we all held our breath as we crouched in an old look-out post over a waterhole, the walls around us filled with the graffiti of the poachers who once used it with impunity. Judging by the slogans, these people came from one of the few Swahili speaking UK comprehensive schools. But our attention was elsewhere. Down below two wild dogs strolled like players onto the stage. One was a typical random assortment of yellow, black

and white blotches - like a harlequin. How it enlivened the brown scenery and what a rich spectacle a troupe of these animals would have made, I thought. Its companion was a sad contrast, black but for its white paintbrush tail tip, and limping badly. Was this Muthige? My thrill at the sight of these creatures was tempered by the thought that they would not survive much longer. The ranger at my elbow was just as fascinated, never having seen them in this park before.

The thrill was one that nature can produce at any time, anywhere and in any person providing that its ability to do the unexpected stays intact. It is nature's diversity that allows it to constantly surprise, scare and inspire, offering tantalising glimpses into strange worlds and other lives. I remember the excitement of seeing a fox before it saw, smelt or heard me, in a hillside field in north Wales, and being able to observe the unaffected behaviour of that wild creature until I was somehow detected. Or a badger poking its stripy head out of its fortress, testing the air just yards from my hiding place, and then shuffling out on bandy legs.

For those who face buffalos rather than badgers, the relationship with nature is sometimes one of drudgery and fear but as soon as people gain control over the relationship they can enjoy the benefits with fewer of the drawbacks. Such is man's influence in the world today that a minimum of control is inevitable, but

there must be a compromise because if there are no safeguards
nature and, ultimately, man are bound to suffer.

[last 2 sentences deleted!]

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