

Finalist – Tatjana Balet

In the quiet emerald gloom of an underwater cave, a torch light illuminates a strange creature. Its delicate black and white arms resemble a fern, stretching out in fractal branches. As the dot of light meanders along the cave wall, it reveals other magnificent plant and animal life, each a unique feature of the Great African Seaforest.

This fractal ‘basket star’ is set in a textured technicolour tapestry – bright purple sea urchins bristle their spines, sunshine-yellow sponges suck at the sea water, vivid blue anemones filter their fill of plankton, and fish, seals and sharks appear in flashes between gently swaying ribbons of kelp.

It is this rich diversity of life that the torch-wielders, marine biologist, Dr Jannes Landschoff, and naturalist filmmaker, Craig Foster, from the Sea Change Project, along with Emeritus Professor of marine biology, Charles Griffiths, seek to illuminate in a new project, ‘1001 Seaforest Species’.

For the Cape Town not-for-profit, the project is the next step after *My Octopus Teacher*, a documentary about Foster’s bond with a local cephalopod that earned an Oscar and focused global attention on South African kelp forests and the life secreted away beneath its fronds.

With 1001, Sea Change is widening its lens beyond profiling a single animal to capture the seaforest holistically. The project’s dual goals are to scientifically document and chronicle the stories of more of its distinctive species – one-thousand-and-one of them. It will result in a unique repository of knowledge that can generate scientific publications and inspire natural history books and films.

Although 1001 is a drop in the ocean compared to the abundance of species in South African kelp forests, the number is a reference to One Thousand and One Nights, the Middle Eastern fables in which a newly wedded princess softens the heart of a murderous king through her captivating storytelling. Similarly, the team hopes to entrance us with stories of the seaforest, winning us over to protect this precious ecosystem and its inhabitants.

1001 seeks to reveal the many faces of the inhabitants of the kelp forest – its ‘biodiversity’. Biodiversity – the variety of life – underpins the existence of life itself, including our own. Headlines warn of biodiversity loss as one of the greatest environmental crises of our time, but lay people don’t always have a real understanding of the idea. ‘We talk about biodiversity so much, but we don’t really have a visual concept,’ says Landschoff.

Landschoff conceptualised the 1001 project to tell stories of creatures like the basket star, introducing us to the seaforest’s biodiversity and, through this connection, deepening the public’s understanding of the mystery, wonder and fragility of this ecosystem.

‘What if we find 1001 animals on our doorstep and put them onto a big canvas and

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say, “Look; these are all the incredible animals that live here. If we lose this place, this is what’s at stake”?’ says Landschoff.

Sea Change is aware of the power a connection with the ocean holds. The team applies this bond through ‘underwater tracking’, a technique that is a core pillar of all the organisation’s field work. According to Landschoff, underwater tracking is ‘an observational skill, a listening in and taking notice of the natural world.’ Impressions left by animals in the sand and the debris they discard as they eke out an existence in their liquid environment is the key to unravelling their life stories.

After filming a documentary in the Kalahari Desert, Foster began applying San tracking techniques to the marine environment while finding solace in the kelp forest. Meanwhile, as master’s student and supervisor respectively at the University of Cape Town, Landschoff and Griffiths were also in the water, trailing sea creatures while conducting scientific field work. ‘We were doing underwater tracking all the time without even knowing it,’ reflects Landschoff.

Underwater tracking is the conceptual meeting point where the project’s scientific rigor coalesces with its natural history storytelling. ‘It was what brought us together,’ says Landschoff.

A dive a day is Sea Change’s recipe to learning the hidden habits of this underwater world. Details emerge only when immersed in the ocean over time. Eventually, a diver will enter the kelp forest not as a visitor navigating uncharted territory, but as one returning home to a familiar space with understanding.

Sea Change approaches the seaforest with openness. This ‘exploratory science’ is a technique that, in contrast to structured hypothesis-driven science, creates opportunities to discover mysteries previously unknown, through presence, observation and connection.

According to Landschoff, entering the seaforest with a binary hypothesis to prove or disprove prevents the noticing of a treasure trove of possibility in an infinitely diverse natural space: ‘[If] you’re always asking a question, “Do I get A or B?”, you’re missing out on other opportunities for outcomes. There might be a whole alphabet of A to Z... but because you’re asking a specific question, you’re never open to finding these out.’

Once an interesting candidate is observed, hypothesis-based science guides species identification. Species are photographed, examined under the microscope, sampled for genetic testing, and the results compared to existing taxonomic knowledge.

They have catalogued about 300 species so far and frequently uncover species new to science. This work will contribute to biodiversity knowledge of South African kelp forests, information useful for designing measures for its protection.

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Landschoff hopes 1001 can inspire the return of natural history approaches grounded in connection with nature into academia. ‘If you never leave your laboratory, never go out into nature, then you're easily missing the bigger picture,’ says Landschoff.

1001 bridges worlds: those of academic science and natural history storytelling, the ex situ of the lab and in situ of the kelp forest, ways of doing science and ways of being human. It is also a personal tribute, a way of thanking a place that has given so much. ‘I owe the seaforest and the ocean so much. It’s the greatest inspiration of my life,’ says Landschoff, ‘...1001 is an expression of myself; of how to live and how to give back to nature.’