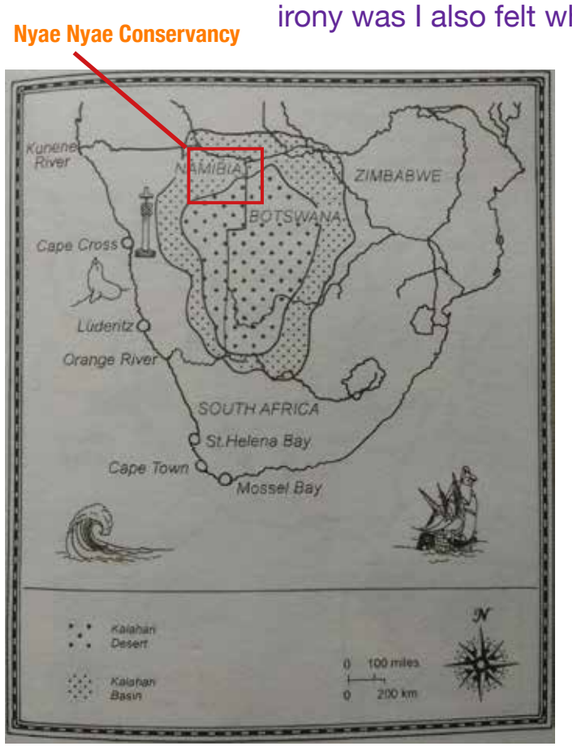
Lessons from the Kalahari

Jon Cree

The most radical thing any of us can do at this time is to be fully present to what is happening in the world.

Joanna Macy

Before ‘lock-down’ I spent 10 hours loping across a piece of land in the Welsh borders that I hadn’t trod before, trying to stay in the ‘here and now’. It was like a saunter. The root of ‘saunter’, is I believe, from the French ‘a la saun terre’, which translates as ‘to the holy place’. Indeed I felt I met some ‘holy places’, but the irony was I also felt what it was like to be ‘domesticated’.



Map from ‘The Old Way’ by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas

It took me right back to the Kalahari ... to my time with the oldest Hunter-Gatherer community on the planet ... I felt what it means to be human in this fenced landscape.

My visit, was at the invite of the Ju/’hoansi community (San bushman to many colonialists). They are the last of the master-trackers community in the Nyae Nyae conservancy in Northern Namibia, who have very much kept so-called eco-tourism at arrow’s length!

I need to avoid modern conceits and romantic fantasies of hunter-gatherer communities.

It was both humbling and deeply ‘human’ to spend time with a culture that maintains some of the practices of their, and our, ancestors from 150,000 years ago, and who are arguably directly connected to the “cradle of humanity”* on the edge of the Okavango delta.

(* Marshall Thomas, 2006)

The Welsh Marches – a fenced, domesticated landscape with islands of ‘managed’ woodland

On the edge of extinction, the Ju/’hoansi have become semi-nomadic, forced to be so as Southern Africa has become ‘fenced’, which has interrupted mass animal migrations. Their lands were taken by the Bantu pastoralists and ultimately they were ‘colonized’ by the Europeans.

The majority now live in ‘stationary’ communities, but still go out to ‘hunt’ and forage, something that is fundamental to their very being. No hunt can guarantee a kill because so-called game is increasingly depleted and now the Ju/’hoansi depend largely on harvesting the Devil’s Tooth Claw from the desert.

This plant is an essential ingredient for supplements sold in Europe to treat osteoarthritis and back pain. The income from this ‘work’ is very small and provides just enough so the families can avoid starvation.

This led me to consider the Ju/'hoansi view of 'work', a word that isn't really in their vocabulary. I asked our main interpreter, "What is it about bushman not really understanding the term 'work'?". He replied, "Why work when life is for living and relaxing?" I commented on him carving a gemsbok figure and spending time burning the markings into the camphor wood, a craft many engage in to make and sell artefacts to supplement their income. He replied, **"That's not work, that's life and pleasure. We make the best of what we have"**. This chimed with my previous reading suggesting the Ju/'Hoansi have always made the best of what they have, not relying on expansion into new lands.

The latest threat to the Ju/'hoansi is, perhaps, more immediate than climate change; a TB epidemic. Almost half the community has the disease, half of whom are highly infectious and will probably die of the disease.

Cybertracking – mapping routes, habits and habitat of megafauna combining contemporary technology with ancient on-the-ground tracking – the only way of truly knowing what is happening to large mammal populations.

Many of my preconceptions of the bushman were challenged; for example, the wearing of 'modern' clothes. They realise that 'cybertracker' accreditation could bring them better 'paid' work, utilising their tracking and indigenous knowledge in the conservation and 'true eco-tourism' world. They have a foot firmly in this century and 'know' what is happening in the world.

So what were my main learnings apart from the experience of common routines, the tracking and nature-based teachings, the attitude of killing to live rather than living to kill, and a rudimentary learning of some of the 'click' language?

My abiding memory combines humbleness and egalitarianism.
There seemed to be little hierarchy. The elders were held in esteem, especially the accredited 'master trackers'. However, in terms of who made the calls within the community, there was seemingly no one more important than anyone else. Women and children played an equal role in the community. The women were as skilled as the men when it came to foraging and hunting, and some women are master trackers.

Hunting is not just a man's domain. The eldest woman was the matriarch of the community. She seemed to keep egos in check by insulting those who put on airs and graces – a sure way to ensure egalitarianism. She reminded me of a Suzman quote about Lee, a hunter.

"When a young man kills much meat, he comes to think of himself as a chief or a big man – and thinks of the rest of us as his servants or inferiors. We can't accept this ... so we always speak of his meat as worthless. This way, we cool his heart and make him gentle."

There was seemingly a lack of ego in this 'humbleness'. I left with a feeling that there was an acceptance of 'the now' without judgment. This appears a sustainable way of living, but how do I square this with the fact that this may be the reason they are marginalised within the Namibian society? Is there an unwillingness to push forward any 'leaders'?

Ancient Sustainable harvest of a desert tuber, a source of food and water

While the Ju/'hoansi see education as the way to survival for their community, there was also a deep wish to maintain their indigenous connection to the land. Indeed, **the land is them and they are the land.**

Since my return, I have been mulling over another Kalahari conversation. On our last night one of my fellow visitors asked, **"What gives you hope? - The answer was simple - "Understanding".** Still I am left with many questions. Here are just two:

- **How do we encourage understandings and feelings for our own indigenous roots in British educational settings?**
- **How do we create a sense of being fully present to the immediate and wider world for our students?**

The Nyae Nyae – the Kalahari Hunter in the desert after the first rains for three years.
A conservancy with no fences apart from the ones adjoining Botswana, 'game reserves' and pastoral land.

References and Resources

Affluence without Abundance – what we can learn from the world's most successful civilisation. James Suzman. Penguin (2019). Also listen to this podcast from Suzman on his Anthropos website
https://soundcloud.com/james-suzman/210113-radio-702-jcw-1505

See this article from James Suzman on **new sustainable ways of organising 'capital'** based on his times and study of and with the Ju/'Hoansi:
https://www.theguardian.com/money/2020/oct/04/blue-sky-thinking-is-it-time-to-stop-work-taking-over-our-lives

The Old Way – a story of the first people. Elizabeth Marshall Thomas. Picador (2006)

Jon Cree is an Ecological Educator and Trainer.

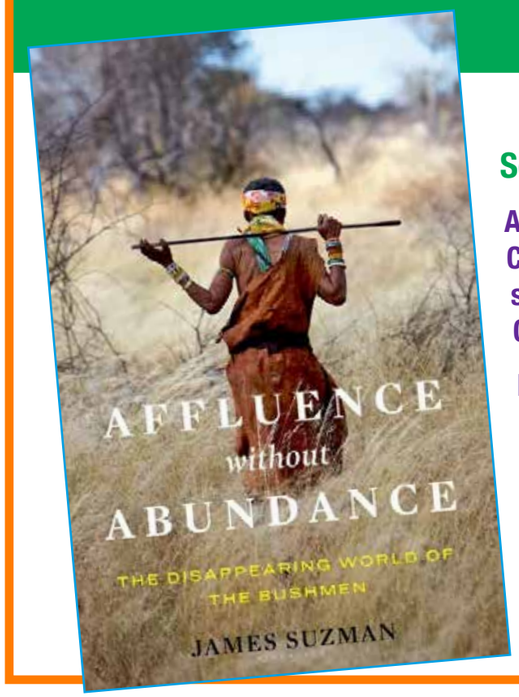
Previously at Bishop Woods Environment Centre, Worcestershire.

I am also involved in a group supporting the San Bush people in raising funds to support the TB clinic and short term food security.

See https://www.gofundme.com/f/yvtdj5-supporting-humanities-oldest-culture-san-bushmen?utm_source=whatsapp&utm_medium=chat&utm_campaign=p_cf+share-flow-1

A valuable stimulus: A collection of James Suzman's photos published by The Guardian.

Learning from the wisdom of indigenous communities



Seeking Elephant Times articles

As part of the proposed project focusing on The Commonwealth [linked to the 2022 Games]we are seeking examples of teaching about Indigenous Communities.

How do we make the notion of traditional wisdom accessible to learners?

Please email