



MY OCTOPUS TEACHER

A BLUE REEF REVIEW

REBECCA HANSELL - NOVEMBER 2020

Rebecca Hansell, Junior Aquarist at Blue Reef Hastings and film-fan, shares her insight and opinion on Netflix's new hit documentary.

As we hunker down for lockdown 2.0 here in the UK, I am sure we will all be spending numerous hours scanning through Netflix, to find something to fill the long evenings ahead. So, let me help you out! If you haven't checked it out or heard of it already, let me recommend adding 'My Octopus Teacher' to your watch list.

'A filmmaker forges an unusual friendship with an octopus living in a South African kelp forest, learning as the animal shares the mysteries of her world.'

This description alone had me sold! Having recently started working at my local aquarium, I have a newfound interest and appreciation

for the intelligent species that lay just below the surface of our oceans, so to learn more about this amazing species was a great way to spend my evening.

The film not only explores the behaviour, cognition and intelligence of the common octopus, but it also looks at humans, our approach to both life and nature, and how this is impacting us. It shows the importance of immersing children in the natural world to spark their interest and respect for the beauty of the planet, whilst also highlighting the need to maintain that connection to nature as we grow older. This is often something easier said than done, but we should try. We can help avoid burnout by mixing up our routines, shocking our senses by throwing ourselves into nature – whether this is literally immersing ourselves in the oceans or just feeling the wind blow past us during a walk

outside – we are part of nature and in modern life, it is all too easy to forget that.

Before I start on a full blown essay of how nature can help us maintain our good mental health, let's focus on the star of this film; the common octopus.

Here are some facts to begin to explain how fascinating these animals are:

They use camouflage to hide in plain sight whilst fleeing from predators. It does this by changing its pigment cells and using extensive networks of specialised muscles in its skills to mimic colours, patterns and textures of its surrounding – a hugely vital skill to stay alive in an ocean full of predators.

If the octopus is discovered by a predator, it has a secondary line of defence. It can release a cloud

of black ink which will temporarily blind the predator, and impair its sense of smell, whilst the octopus makes its escape.

The octopus is essentially a liquid animal. It can squeeze through any space which is smaller than its beak – which is the only solid part of its body.

An octopus is considered the most intelligent of all invertebrates – they are known to show traits that are shared with humans, including playfulness, curiosity, problem-solving, and even individual personality quirks, etc.

Animal cognition and intelligence is a field of research that is gaining momentum and we are fast learning that there are many species in the natural world that are far more intelligent than we initially presumed. This is something that truly fascinates me and is something that I always try to learn more about when I can – book/film/paper recommendations always welcome! I won't pretend to be an expert in this field at all, I would describe it as an amateur interest but with some practical experience, essentially enthusiasm at its finest!

So, instead of going into the details of animal intelligence, I want to take a moment to think about what lessons we can learn from nature and from this Netflix documentary. The first that springs to mind is that it costs nothing to be sensitive to, and care for, other species on this planet. We are incredibly privileged as humans; we hold so much power over the other species around us. How we use this power will be the make or break

of the natural world, as with other animals and humans alike; it costs nothing to be kind.

The second lesson I'd like the focus on is the continual adaptation of the natural world. Sometimes we forget that as humans, we should still always be learning and developing. Most of us finish our education and get 'adult-jobs' and think that we are done. This is not the case. We should spend our lives wanting to learn more, being open to change and developing to become the best possible representation of our species. We are never the finished article.

The third and final lesson that struck me when watching this documentary was that, in comparison to some other species on the planet, we have it pretty easy. We are top of the food chain; we have shaped the world to keep us comfortable and happy, for the most part. So, if something like an octopus, is able to adapt to danger, regrow lost limbs and develop an awareness of its surroundings that will keep it alive long enough to parent the next generation, then there is really no excuse for us not to be open to change too.

If 2020 has taught us anything, it's that we don't fully understand the extent of our impact on the planet and that, when we need to, we can change.

To keep our oceans a viable habitat for these creatures, and to prevent irreversible damage to our home planet, we need to change. It might be inconvenient, it might mean a different day-to-day for most of us, it might mean compromise, but the thing to remember is that it will also mean a future for us all. In my opinion, the promise of a future for those of us who walk on land, those

of us who swim in the seas, or those that are capable of both, is a wonderful thing to work towards.

Some additional fun facts;

- Octopuses collect shells and other objects that they find on the sea floor to build fortresses around their lairs.
- In most octopus' species, it's customary after sex for the female octopus to eat her partner!
- Octopuses kept in captivity often escape their aquarium homes and raid other nearby tanks.
- Octopuses have high-resolution vision, just like humans do!
- Octopuses use their suckers to grip seafloor objects in shallow water.

At Hastings Aquarium, we're lucky enough to be home to Baxter the Giant Pacific Octopus. If you're interested in finding out more about octopuses and would like to see Baxter as well as over 250 breeds of sealife from across the globe, do come down to visit us at Hastings Aquarium.

