



## Spicing up the lives of Serengeti animals by treating park life as soap

A new BBC natural history series proves creatures are like people, its creators tell Sarah Marshall

As a fly on the wall, watching family sagas unravel can be gripping – whether it's Kim and the Kardashians, Corrie's Barlow clan or even the wild inhabitants of Tanzania's Serengeti National Park. Anyone who's been on safari will understand the parallels.

Get the "Big Five syndrome" out of your system and the savannah becomes a soap opera, where matters of life and death are played out in a game drive, leaving you dangling on a cliffhanger when the sun dips and park gates are pulled closed.

actually became less able to handle rough seas (because they became too heavy for a small crew to hold head-on to the high swell of storms).

Because what would once have been miraculous – instantaneous communication across any earthly distance – has become ordinary, and what was once ordinary – travel by boat across a stretch of fierce sea – seems like a huge adventure, it's difficult for us to empathise with even the recent past. But after two centuries when societies turned their backs on small boats and coastal travel, Scotland is today pioneering a cultural rediscovery of our threatened oceans.

We're in the midst of an extraordinary outpouring of ocean literature in Gaelic, Scots and English; there's a resurgence of oceanic art in the elemental frenzies of canvases by Ellis O'Connor or Ruth Brownlee; there's music like Erland Cooper's Sule Skerry, and plays such as Morna Young's Lost at Sea, which each explore the intersection of ocean and identity. Initiatives such as Visit Scotland's Year of Coasts and Waters (2020) emphasise the importance of seas to both ecology and heritage. Suddenly we're able to be back in touch with our water, to the extent that kayakers setting out from Shetland a few years from now might not feel any contradiction in the feeling of wildness, and the knowledge of community, that struck me so strongly as I set out.



● *The Frayed Atlantic Edge: A Historian's Journey from Shetland to the Channel* is published by William Collins, £18.99. Out now.



↑ John Downer brings his experience to bear on 'wildlife drama'

because I believe we need to have more empathy and respect for nature and the wonderful animals we share the planet with. If our viewers relate to some of our characters in a personal and emotional way and this means they have a connection beyond just another natural history show, then I think that would be wonderful and a positive thing."

The task of formulating that sense of intimacy fell to producer John Downer, who partnered with Fuller



**"The animals were so calm and at peace and I felt a closeness and connection unlike any other trip I had ever made"**

on the project and spent two years filming in the field. A technical wizard, he was responsible for the Spy In The Wild series, pioneering animatronic gadgets such as the spy-cam and boulder-cam. Along with multiple viewpoint camera shots, these tools have been used to elevate Serengeti beyond your typical nature show.

"This is more than a documentary; it's dramatised," says Downer. "It tells a story that fills the gaps you normally get in documentaries." Key characters include

lioness Kali, who will do anything to defend her cubs, heroic baboon Bakari, who finds himself caught up in a fierce love triangle, and hyena Zalika, who's the subject of a tragic scene which brought tears to Fuller's eyes.

Contrary to the strict stance generally adopted by conservationists, Serengeti leans into anthropomorphism. But according to Downer, who trained as a zoologist, that's not a bad thing.

"For a long time, there was a trend to focus on the big events and the epic stuff and not tell the stories of the individuals," he says. "But to me and Simon that's where the interest lies – and I think it's the same for the audience."

"You've got to relate to these animals to care about them."

He hopes that once they've watched the series, viewers might also be inspired to visit the Grumeti Reserve or similar areas where conservation is a key priority.

"The newest [tourism] conservation areas involve local communities – so they're all benefiting from these animals."

"And there are people who want to go and visit for a trip of a lifetime. For me, that's the future; that's where the hope lies."

● *Serengeti continues on BBC One on Thursdays at 8pm.*

# "Powerful tides ripped between rocks, a wall of writhing water"

A peril-filled year-long trip by kayak from Shetland to the English Channel reminded historian David Gange that the people of these islands were once masters of the seas

Kayaking was once a day-to-day pursuit for thousands of people across large parts of the North Atlantic. But in most regions, the use of traditional boats had declined by the early 20th century. At that time, a handful of Scottish and Welsh kayakers were instrumental in developing the leisure traditions that kept kayaking alive. This is why much kayak literature is set in Scotland. Most famously, Alastair

Dunnett (former editor of *The Scotsman*) wrote *The Canoe Boys* about a 1930s voyage from Glasgow to Skye in boats improvised from plywood, fabric and car-tyre inner tubes. Many decades later, Brian Wilson's *Blazing Paddles* (1998) recounted a pioneering journey around Scotland and became a rare book to rival Dunnett's for the status of kayak classic. These are standout works in relation to a pursuit that has still given rise to remarkably little literature.

No-one who knows the Scottish coastline will be surprised that its immense diversity has proved so inspirational. The gentle beauty of the water round the Summer Isles is a learner's paradise. Sheltered from Atlantic weather by the Western Isles, its wildlife – often porpoises and dolphins but sometimes rare species like little auks and even orca – can make even a calm day feel like an exceptional adventure. At the other end of Scotland's vast spectrum,



↑ Clockwise from above: David Gange on calm waters; Shetland cliffs; rough day on the water; the author on land

preposterous sea rocks like Foula (Shetland), Mingulay (Outer Hebrides) and St Kilda erupt from dramatic, whale-filled seas that can't be crossed without considerable planning and trepidation.

However, deep in rough, tidal waters, these small islands have been home to unique, diverse cultures and are filled with stories that reveal different visions of the British past from those told in any history book with "Britain" in its title. That's why I, as a historian, decided my research project for a year should be a kayak journey from Shetland to the Channel. The aim was to cover all the Atlantic coastlines of Britain and Ireland, and to write a book that treated these as the centre of British and Irish history, as they were before roads and rail turned the geography of the islands inside out.

Inland cities would

then become remote and peripheral presences.

This produced unusual perspectives on British and Irish geography. Of the 12 months spent travelling, seven were on the long, deeply indented coasts of Scotland. Only the very last month touched England. The majority of the journey was through regions with Shaetlan, Gaelic, Irish or Welsh as first language. I'd paddle for five months before reaching my second town with a population of more than 600 (this was Ullapool; the first had been Stromness four months earlier). Few routes would do more to challenge general preconceptions about what Britain and Ireland are.

Along the way I spent many days in coastal archives and libraries, picking out the stories that would become the book. These places were a revelation in themselves. From Shetland to Canna, many islands have archives that are richer and better cared for than those of cities with a thousand times their population.

The richly detailed records of coastal life contained in those archives generated a huge psychological contradiction when kayaking and this was nowhere more dramatic than in Shetland. Shetland Museum and Archive overflows with stories that make every rock a workplace, every little inlet a

home or bonhoga (a Shaetlan term for a meaningful place). These records swathe the coastline in its rich tradition of Norse-tinged names that official maps attempted to replace with knappit ("proper"/anglicised) equivalents. Yet kayaking here felt wild, unpeopled and remote. The starting point for the whole journey had been a long, fjord-like inlet called Burra Firth at the north end of Shetland which leads out towards the northernmost rock of the British Isles (Otsta/Out Stack). Under some of the most spectacular cliffs in Britain, and with the sky entirely filled with thousands of circling gannets (so many that the sound of their wings scything air drowned out the sound of the ocean and made my navigation difficult), I felt more isolated than I ever have before. Powerful tides ripped between the sea rocks and formed a wall of writhing water in front of my journey south. Moving among hundreds of fulmars and dozens of minke whales, I didn't see another person all day. That kayak beneath the cliffs was one of the most difficult I've ever done: after being forced under water by tidal overfalls within the first hour, I almost gave up the whole journey straight away.

These contrasts are among the great challenges of interpreting Scotland's coastline. Scottish seas are



**"Scottish seas are some of the most brutal and most isolating in the world"**