

Simple Inspiration

My name is **Alan McSmith**, and I am a wilderness guide. And these are my thoughts about my home continent of Africa.

The old man's eyes twinkled in the firelight. He was sitting on the ground at the campfire, waiting quietly for his pot of tea to brew. It seemed as if he had all the time in the world. He had a sense of knowing about him, a feeling that he completely belonged. As I studied the small canvas bag alongside him containing the sum total of his belongings, I was struck with the fact that despite my privileged life, my luxuries and securities, and in a society which measures happiness in terms of possessions, there was in actual fact nothing of value my world could offer him. There was an aura of great peace around the campfire because of him.

The old man's name is Sariqo Sakega, and he is over 80 years young. He is a tribal elder living in a remote part of the Okavango Delta in Botswana, and has been a guide and fisherman since he was a young boy. People say he knows the Okavango better than any man alive; some say better than any man who has ever lived.

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I remember that night around the campfire on a remote island in Okavango as clear as its waters... It was during an immense adventure of exploring the Okavango Delta by traditional dugout canoes, poling through the wildest wilderness in Africa. For periods of four weeks we were cut-off from the civilised world and lost in time. Or timelessness, perhaps. The old man was my guide. Although uneducated and unsophisticated in the eyes of modern ways, I was led on a journey of dignity and humility, and although he could not speak much English, he spoke a universal language

of the heart. One which everyone on the trail could understand. It was a night that something stirred deep within me.

MOULDED EXPECTATIONS

Fast forward to a different place and time. One of deadlines, outcomes, pressures. Expectations which result in a corporate goal-orientated concept of leadership; that if we achieve outside a set of accepted parameters, society deems us anti-social, rebellious, or perhaps even failures. These moulded expectations, which we use as barometers of future success, are, as a society, slowly consuming us.

In this place, the majority of our youth live in an environment of instant gratification and turbulent demand. The trend of non-sustainable consumerism is escalating, and our natural values of social responsibility have become as badly eroded as our forests and grasslands. We are isolating ourselves from nature around us. And they are learning from us.

Society has *mined our minds*, and as a result is in danger of producing a future generation of young leaders who are losing, or who have lost, a precious connection with sustainable, durable, natural orientated leadership.

THE CIVILISED WORLD

Now ask yourself the same questions I did that night out in the bush: which of these two worlds in question is in fact, the civilised one? Which one, based on my descriptions, resonates the most with you? And how is it that we can discover so much from men like Sariqo Sakega who hold the ancient code of natural stewardship so close to their hearts?

The answer, as far as I am concerned, touches the core of why modern society faces the age of great social, financial and environmental turmoil we do ... We have forgotten how to live sustainably with our world.



LEIDERSCHAP

tekst Alan McSmith, beeld Leonie Haas



Alan McSmith lives and works as a wilderness guide and motivational speaker in South Africa. He regularly runs leadership trails in Botswana and South Africa, sharing the wilderness experience. He is an accomplished storyteller, and travels extensively with his leadership presentations. His website is www.alanmcsmith.com.



It's with caution, however, that I use the word *sustainable* here, as it's possibly one of the most over-hyped and commercialised terms around. Sariqo Sakega would have a different definition than you or I, as he would not understand the concepts of 'carbon footprints', 'greenhouse emissions' or 'fossil fuel reservoirs'. He lives in a world where sustainability is not a fad, nor a buzzword, but rather a set of intrinsic principles which he lives by. He knows that his world around him is determined by his own thoughts, words, deeds and expectations of others. He lives compassionately as he knows that we are all, just as he is, searching for contentment in our lives. In an understanding which transcends all of ours as he doesn't just talk the talk, he lives the walk. He, and other natural leaders, is a simple man, but far from simplistic.

But although my opinion is that we can learn infinitely more from his leadership than he can from ours, I'm not suggesting that we all should drop out and live as fishermen and trackers in the bush! Far from it. We would do well by bringing in a little of Sariqo Sakega's world into ours. We can learn a great deal from his sacred attitude to his environment, his neighbours, and above all, to his legacy.

This is where the true value of wilderness trails lie, as the experiences in the bush can touch, stir and elevate your life. No matter your vocation, status or creed, it's rather like returning to the campfire of your soul.

NOT MUCH TIME

I believe that once we have been touched by something meaningful, resonating at the deepest level, it becomes difficult to live without it and still feel fulfilled. For me, this 'thing' is wilderness.

And it has forged my life. I will always be eternally grateful to men like Sariqo Sakega for their humble ways and for opening my eyes to see the dignity of nature. For they may not be corporate leaders, presidents or wealthy sports stars, but they lead their most significant lives possible, making me realise that it's not so much *where* we are heading, but how we are getting there.

Take this scenario for example... A child starting school this year will retire by (about) 2068. And the pressure to achieve and to 'conform' will be enormous. But despite all the advanced technology and science of our time, we are in actual fact no closer to

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knowing what the future holds for us, let alone him or her. If our future is uncertain and fearful, how do we best prepare the future for generations to come?

How do we turn society's trajectory to more acceptable levels of social, moral, and environmental understanding? How do we make a difference in this child's – our future leader's – life? Because there's not much time.

We need to return to a simple form of inspiration. ■

 www.wildernessvision.org
 Alan McSmith op TEDx Amsterdam 2011

EEN BIJZONDERE ONTMOETING

Een van de doelstellingen van het New Financial Forum is 'nieuw' leiderschap in de financiële sector te stimuleren. Rondom dit thema bieden Avéro Achmea en het New Financial Forum, de Ambassadeurs de mogelijkheid een inspirerende sessie bij te wonen in Burgers' Zoo in Arnhem. Op woensdagmiddag 24 oktober neemt Alan McSmith, wilderness guide, de deelnemers mee op een persoonlijke trail. Zijn ervaringen vanuit onder meer de Okavango Delta in Botswana bieden naast mooie verhalen ook aanknopingspunten op het gebied van duurzaam leiderschap. Door het organiseren van deze bijeenkomst steunt Avéro Achmea de projecten van Wilderness Vision, dat educatieprogramma's en projecten ontwikkelt in Zuid-Afrika.

