Episode 1 - The Power to Protect

Kerllen Costa: It's a place of life, death and mystery, and it's called the Okavango Delta. The life is the water, and the water knows no borders. It twists and turns through Angola and Namibia until it converges in Botswana, spreading into one mighty freshwater delta called the Okavango.

The Delta, and the rivers that feed it, are the beating heart of water for the inhabitants of three countries in southern Africa. Thousands of Elephants. Millions of birds. And hundreds of hippos. But sometimes the water doesn't fill The Delta and no one really knows why.

For centuries, during the driest parts of the year, seasonal floods have interrupted the Kalahari Desert, the largest continuous stretch of sand on the planet. Without the water, the desert takes over. The reeds choke the channels, and the animals and the people wander inward, deeper and deeper, searching. Sand becomes layered with trash and animal corpses. That is the death. And as for the mystery? I can't even pretend that there is just one.

Koketso Mookodi: *Setswana - Where does the water come from?*

Cat Jaffee: Where does the water come from?

Koketso Mookodi: *Setswana - What happen to it?*

Koketso Mookodi: What happens to it?

Koketso Mookodi: *Setswana - Who exactly relies on it?*

Cat Jaffee: Who exactly relies on it?

Koketso Mookodi: *Setswana - And what if all of a sudden, it stopped?*

Kerllen Costa: And what if all of a sudden it stopped?

Kerllen: Over the last decade, people around the Delta have started asking these questions more frequently, and so one man decided he will go find the answers. And while on his mission, he uttered a phrase that has become both a gift and a curse. To this day, it is broadcast to millions of people across the world.

Steve Boyes: I will do everything in my power to protect this place.

Kerllen Costa: This is Dr. Steve Boyes, who is also my boss. Steve is a South African zoologist whose family has lived in the Cape for over 200 years. I'll play it again.

Steve Boyes: I will do everything in my power to protect this place.

Kerllen Costa: He says it quickly, but it's a loaded statement. And with it, Steve has tied the fate of the Okavango water system to his own, and in some ways to mine. I'll tell you more about Steve in a minute. First, let me introduce myself.

My name is Kerllen Costa. I'm an Angolan biologist. I started working with Steve in this region in 2016, first as a volunteer helping to collect wildlife data in Eastern Angola, where the waters of the Delta start. Over time, I convinced Steve to bring me onto his team as a camera trapper.

Camera trapping involves setting up motion activated cameras to take photos of the animals wandering around the forest, the ones we cannot seen the light of day. Angola spent the last 40 years either fighting a war or recovering from it, not conducting scientific surveys. So we have decades of research to catch up on, including knowing what animals live here.

The more time I spent in these villages, the more I realized that science is just one piece in solving the mysteries of this region. Many of the clues live in the stories told by local people — in legend, myth, magic.

One day, I was placing these cameras in the highlands of Eastern Angola. Although I was in the middle of a dense forest, I could sense someone else was there. I turned my head. An Indigenous hunter was watching me. He was athletic, shredded with thick muscles. His hands were calloused. His eyes were the kind that looked straight into your soul. He had a bow and arrow strapped to his back. I motioned him to sit with me on the spongy forest floor. The hunter shared his name, Sarabecca, and then cautioned me, “This is not the place for me to tell your stories. I first need to absorb you. Then I will share things. Or not.”

I followed the hunter to his village and he sat around the huge fire. I remember having this sensation that the stars and the moon were sitting with us, because they were so close. We don't speak the same language. I grew up in Luanda, Angola's capital, where we were raised with Portuguese. Sarabecca spoke to me in Luchaze, an older language of Angola. There were long silences and then finally he said, “I thought you were

chindelle.” This means a foreigner or a Westerner. He went on, “Although you look different, I can feel that you're somehow part of us. I think I can share some things with you.”

In the morning, Sarabecca and I walked deeper and deeper into the forest. There was no light, no paved roads. Landmines from Angola's 40 years of war were buried in the sand around us. Rusting tanks along the route, another reminder of the conflict, were the closest thing to a road sign. And then there was a clearing. And right in the middle of it, a stretch of water so calm it had no color. It mirrored everything below it and around it. It was a lake, and it was suspended atop the sand, almost like it should disappear any minute.

This was the first time I had ever seen anything like it. And to me, it felt like it was all held together by magic. And it is. Because this is one of the more than 20 source lakes in Eastern Angola. Each one feeds a river flowing across Southern Africa. Some of them end up in the Okavango Delta and some flow into Victoria Falls.

These lakes are some of the most important bodies of freshwater on this part of the continent, and yet so few people know they exist. While the local community obviously has spent time in this place, I mean, Sarabecca is the one who brought me here, there is not a single structure or boat near the lake shores. It looks untouched, pristine, a conservationist's dream. And I learned, it is this way for one big reason: Mukisi...

Staring down at the lake, Sarabecca told me the story of Mukisi in a whisper. Mukisi is a myth passed between generations of local people over campfires and bedtime stories. It is a dragon that lives in the source lakes and terrorizes any person who comes close to its shores.

Mukisi is a demon. It kills, it destroys. It strikes fear in the hearts of local people. But honestly, I think we’ve overlooked something about Mukisi — something that could hold an important clue to the secrets of this place and how we can protect it.

This podcast is the story of the guardians of the water and their secrets. These guardians have a monumental task: trying to protect the remote, near pristine environment, facing threats from all sides. Threats like wildfires, drought, habitat destruction, industrial development, and over-hunting and charcoal production; as well as generational wounds from a history of colonialism, war and displacement of Indigenous people. What have we done to each other in the name of wilderness? Is there any place left in the world we can save from ourselves? And if so, will this water system be it?

You're listening to Guardians of the River. I'm your host, Kerllen Costa, and we're a podcast exploring how to protect some of the most remote and wild places on the planet, starting with the Okavango Delta and the Source lakes.

So how did Steve, the zoologist from South Africa, become so entwined with the Okavango Delta?

Steve Boyes: They listen to me going, eeee, ahhh!

Kerllen Costa: This is the sound of Steve when he's on expedition around 10 p.m.

Steve Boyes: It is the cold, freezing cold buckets just before bed and midnight yoga. Just bah, cleanses you.

Kerllen Costa: Steve is tall and wiry. And the way he talks, it's like he's rushing to complete his thoughts before something more fleeting makes an appearance like a bird. That's because ever since Steve was a kid growing up on the Cape, he's kept an eye out for parrots.

Steve Boyes: I thought parrots belonged on parrots shoulders and in cages, not free flying in Africa. And that captivated me.

Kerllen Costa: Entranced by the Cape Parrot and then its cousin, the Meyor's parrot, Steve pursued degrees in forestry, conservation, ornithology and zoology.

Steve Boyes: Within two and a half months of meeting the Meyer's parrot, I was doing a Ph.D. on them. That's how fascinated I was by this bird.

Kerllen Costa: Steve followed the Meyer's parrot to its home in the Okavango Delta. And there he found something he'd been looking for his whole life.

Steve Boyes: I fell in love with the Delta because of the wildness, the sense of place, real wilderness. And at the age of 20, 21, when I first arrived there, I had not experienced that yet. I come from a family obsessed with wild places and National Parks. And our family wasn't wealthy, so we didn't fly into the Kruger National Park or these other places in South Africa and other countries. We drove there. And my first experience of the Delta, I flew in there. I stayed at the Lodge. I never stayed in Lodge before and had only ever camped. And I remember I didn't even get into the bed. I would lay on top of it. I don't want to ruin it. But that night I lay in absolute paradise. The

sounds of the floodplains wrapped around me. I didn't sleep at all. It was lions calling. It was the wildest place I'd ever been. And when I got back to South Africa, I just turned around, gave up on writing up my master's there, and I went straight to the Delta. It was very clear to me that's what I needed to do.

Kerllen Costa: To pay his bills, Steve worked at a tourist lodge in the Delta named Vudumtiki Camp. And when he wasn't washing dishes or making beds, he was out exploring islands in the Delta — first by foot and eventually using a traditional dugout wooden canoe known as a mokoro. And mokoro is more like a paddle board than a boat. You can steer it by standing up and pushing it across shallow water using a specialized wooden pole, called a ngashi. Steve learned how to survive in the delta from the WaYei. They are indigenous river bushmen that are as comfortable pulling a mokoro across a waterway as they are walking on land.

Steve Boyes: I was... now 19 years working in the Delta. And for the longest time, that was all I cared about.

Kerllen Costa: If it sounds like Steve is steering a mokoro now while he's talking, that's because he is.

Steve Boyes: All I wanted to know was every single plant, tree, bird, insect. That was my obsession. In 2011, I was counting parrots every day. My life was very, very simple. And a Nat Geo filmmaker came, and he had been touring around the whole of Southern Africa. Visited like 40 odd projects. He was looking for, his brief was to make videos for each of the projects to promote them and then find one person to bring back to do something with. To create media with, a film or something.

Kerllen Costa: The filmmaker was named Neil Gelinas and he wanted to know what kind of stories Steve would tell about your Okavango Delta if he could. In that moment, Steve remembered a piece of advice he had received.

Steve Boyes: A friend of mine said, actually, Steve, just think bigger, think bigger.

Kerllen Costa: And so Steve pitched Neil something huge.

Steve Boyes: Explore the sources. See where the water comes from. And what's happening to it across three countries. This vast ecosystem protected in its entirety.

Kerllen Costa: Steve believed that if the world could see the Delta and follow its story right from the start up in Angola, that maybe he could better understand what was

happening to the water. Where did it come from? Where was it going and how could we protect its future?

Steve Boyes: We signed a kind of contract on it on a napkin late at night drinking whiskey where I promised to help him make his first feature film, and he promised to help me for the Okavango project that we called it at the time. That was kind of the trigger for this massive change. I kind of was really happy kinda quietly living the simple life. And life's not simple.

Steve Boyes and team: *(pushing mokoro*) One, two, three! Wait, wait, wait.

Steve Boyes: You are broken physically, mentally. The main thought is: I've made an incredible mistake.

Kerllen Costa: That's what Steve sounds like in the middle of an expedition when his life is anything but simple. At a glance, the objective of it all seemed clear enough: learn more about how the water flows from Angola to Botswana, count and identify the species that live in and around the Delta, and capture all of it for a National Geographic film. But in action, this plan felt like a mess. For one, the team had to travel through Cuito Cuanavale. This is the site of the largest tank battle in Africa since the Second World War. The fighting ended in 2002, but stark reminders of the war remain embedded in the landscape.

To this day, the area is strewn with landmines and unexploded bombs. Bullet holes, pockmark buildings. Battle tanks remain stranded on the side of roads. And police review travel permits at checkpoints for any non-Angolan moving through the countryside. To pull off an expedition like this, Steve needed a parade of Land Cruisers filled with scientists and National Geographic filmmakers, all towing a dozen mokoros. So instead of his usual wardrobe of muddy khakis, Steve quickly found himself in his nicest blazer. Palms sweating, he waited to make a case for the expedition to the local politicians. Their permission would make or break the expedition.

Steve Boyes: We had opportunity before the expedition to go and secure the support of the governor of Cuando Cubango, Higino Carneiro. He's a very imposing person, very powerful, probably the third most powerful person in Angola at the time. And we went to his palace. He was in a kind of lavender safari suit, ivory cane, kind of stereotypical African leader with his entourage, all in black suits and dark glasses. Very impressive. The whole palace that he was in smelled of jasmine.

Kerllen Costa: For forty five minutes. Steve explained what he planned to do.

Steve Boyes: And I sat there and I spoke to him about my passion for the Okavango Delta, explaining some of the science, some of the past work we had done. The work with National Geographic, the plan to make a film and the film crews coming... all these things. And he put his hand up, he said, and this is in Portuguese, but a very deep voice, he said, “Stop. I have one very big problem with this project.” And I’m like, oh, God, here we go. And he said he wanted National Geographic to announce the reemergence of Angola. Angola had been locked up in four decades of armed conflict — landmines — and it was stigmatized. The policies of the wartime government were highly isolationist, and he wanted to see an opening up. And National Geographic puts countries on maps, whether it's South Sudan as a new country or Angola. And he wanted that.

Kerllen Costa: What Steve proposed was considered impossible. He wanted to travel from the source of the Okavango following rivers with mokoros all the way to the Delta. They would cover 1500 kilometers with a team recruited from Botswana, Angola, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. And all along the way, they would count and identify wildlife. He had thought there was no way the Angolan government would allow it. But the mission was approved. And now, it was time to assemble the team.

Adjany Costa: Steve asked a lot of different people about an Angolan researcher that could join the project and one of my university teachers thought I would be crazy enough.

Kerllen Costa: This is my sister, Adjany. She was the only Angolan biologist on this first expedition. Like me, Adjany grew up in the capital, Luanda, and something about growing up in the city during the Civil War is that you ache for the rest of Angola, but you don't exactly know what's there.

Adjany Costa: Hope is not something that most Angolans have. Everywhere throughout the world, we are seen as the super corrupt country where no good will happen to it. Our personalities, our culture, all comes back to the war itself. I did not believe in Angola, period.

Kerllen Costa: And she definitely did not know what to think of Steve.

Adjany Costa: It's this white guy coming from this very developed nice place, hoping to get an adventure.

Kerllen Costa: But she decided to go anyways.

Adjany Costa: It was almost a responsibility, the dual responsibility as an Angolan and as a scientist.

Kerllen Costa: Steve's next pick for his team was a river guide, someone he had known since his days running small research expeditions from Vudumtiki Camp.

Water Setlabosha: My name is Tumuletso Setlabosha. I live in the center of the Okavango Delta. It's wonderful. The people call me Water.

Kerllen Costa: Water belongs to the WaYei tribe in Botswana. And his name comes from the story of his birth. His mother was walking between two villages when she went into labor. To deliver her baby, she found a small puddle of water to sit in, and so she named her new son Water. Almost like a birthright, he's now one of the best mokoro polers in the delta. That's why Steve convinced him to join as a guide.

Water Setlabosha: I was very interested and then said to me, he's going to go into Angola. And then I think about how about this trip myself. I wanted to go into Angola.

Kerllen Costa: Water and what's the delta flow less and less over the years. And like Steve and Adjany, he wanted to know where it came from and where it was going. These three, along with a handful of scientists, WaYei polers, and a film crew, formed the final expedition team

The first real surprise of the expedition came right at the start.

Steve Boyes: It’s a doozy of a forest.

Team member: See this is here, that’s it. That's the floodplain.

Steve Boyes: And I remember there was no road, there's no track, there's nothing. It was just cut marks and trees. As we're going along through dense forest, we discover a minefield and get through it very slowly. And about eight hours later, we have that moment where the trees open to the first clearing that we had found in that whole eight hour drive, we’d just been deep inside this forest. And it was a lake. The water was so crystal clear that we were looking straight through it and looking at the green bottom, all the algal gardens and everything below. It's like a little piece of Caribbean Ocean in the middle of this giant vast forest.

Kerllen Costa: If it sounds like the lake I visited with Sarabecca earlier in this story, that's because there are over 20 lakes in this area. Each one feeds critical rivers in the region. But like most outsiders including myself, Steve didn't know that yet. He was expecting a spring. Not a valley filled with a lake.

Steve Boyes: And go down to the lake for the proper first time, and quiet and everything's quiet. And touch the water. And it was this lake... just seemed ancient and powerful.

Kerllen Costa: Then he also heard about the great legend of Mukisi.

Steve Boyes: You learn about Mukisi in those lakes. You understand why people would have thought and maybe they still are. Maybe we'll find them. There were these big serpent mythical creatures in there because of the power and the sense of place.

Kerllen Costa: Steve and the team launched their mokoros onto the water and began polling through cold mist. It parted like curtains, letting the boats pass. This was the perfect start. Too perfect. When they reached the end of the lake, the water had changed. It became a small, narrow trickle, enough to fill a bottle, but not enough to carry a boat loaded with hundreds of kilos of expedition gear.

Steve Boyes: *(breathing heavy)* Oh okay...All right, so,

Kerllen Costa: Steve and the team had to pull each fully loaded mokoro using harnesses strapped to their shoulders for 14 days.

Adjany Costa: I'm questioning everything in life at this point. I'm questioning the whole efficiency of the project. I'm questioning why didn't Steve come here before and check this out, so we didn't have to endure through all of this.

Kerllen Costa: Adjany wasn't the only one wondering what they were doing here. Steve almost wanted to call the whole thing off. But then...

Steve Boyes: A lot of the time you find yourself knee deep in what you think is the wet edge of the river. But I mean, as soon as we caught into it, this is peat. These are peat deposits.

Kerllen Costa: The team made their first discovery. Peat, a marshy layer of decaying plants and mud. And while satellite images showed the path of a river, nothing but

dragging boats across boggy land exposes the truths of the landscape. How else would they have learned about the existence of Peat if they weren't standing waist deep in it?

Steve Boyes: These peat bogs hold as much as 25 times their own dry weight in water before slowly releasing it. We are literally walking on top of the sponge, holding the water that eventually floods the Okavango Delta.

Kerllen Costa: It took 12 kilometers and two weeks until the team finally made it to open water.

Steve Boyes: *(pulling mokoro)* 1,2, 3. Woo!

Kerllen Costa: Even though Steve and his crew could now paddle the river, they faced more hardship. Fires. Smoke. It was suddenly everywhere.

Steve Boyes: It’s burnt all the way down the channel, all the way south. Now it’s close to camp. We're going to watch it burn as the wind has turned now. It's almost start, and it's going to burn this way faster and faster to the edge of the water.

Kerllen Costa: Fires are a common occurrence in Eastern Angola. Villagers use them to clear land for their crops and to hunt. But what Steve and the team saw felt out of control. Flames roared across the shores, forcing trees to crowd the riverbeds, which meant, by the way, the team hacked the branches to open the channel.

Steve Boyes: OK, nothing. Blockage, blockage, blockage there.

Water Setlabosha: Nothing. Yeah.

Steve Boyes: Just trees, just a forest. Blockage. Escaping the fires, trees are one growing into the river, choking it.

Kerllen Costa: And by night, they watched flames dance across the peat, turning into charred dry sand. Steve's urgency to do something grew.

Steve Boyes: Without forests, without peat deposits, we lose the water. It isn't stored somewhere. It's gone.

Kerllen Costa: Uneasy, but pressed to carry on, the crew continue past great stretches of forest cleared for agricultural development, and the river deepened and widened enough to sustain larger forms of life.

Steve Boyes: That morning we leave early and we are seeing all the crocs. Still out of the water. Biiig crocs.

Kerllen Costa: Steve and his crew were floating on the water.

Steve Boyes: And my brother behind me, he calls like “The reeds, the reeds are moving!”

Kerllen Costa: They couldn't see anything under or around them, but their senses screamed that something was there.

Steve Boyes: And I had to call *cuena,* which is crocodile for the WaYei guys. I can see a trail, no sign of a cross and nothing. See this big swirl on the right. I call *cubu*, hippo..

Kerllen Costa: Not a crocodile. A hippo. And not a curious hippo. A hippo who is frightened and circling back to defend himself.

Steve Boyes: And as I'm waving back...you look and the water on the left just lifts up, like a big breath. It's about a meter and a half, you know, six, seven, eight foot of clearwater and its face appears there. And it's the next is like WAAA. Now, you’re like underwater, just bubbles everywhere.

Kerllen Costa: Splashing through the water, swimming for their lives, Steve and a crewmate was also in the overturned mokoro, knew the hippo was in the water with them. But they couldn't see where.

Steve Boyes: Swim, swim, swim!

Kerllen Costa: They made it safe to shore and the team retrieved the broken boat, punctured by the forceful bite of hippo tusks.

Steve Boyes: We had a social media team, they were tweeting after this had happened. And I wanted Kirst, my wife, to hear from me before hearing from them. And I'd walked like 200 yards away with the satellite phone. I was like phoning, phoning, phoning. And she eventually answers. And I hear a voice. And it's just I can collapse and start crying and shaking. I couldn't talk to it. I couldn't tell what was going on. You really realized what we're doing

Kerllen Costa: This hippo attack changes Steve.

Steve Boyes: Never fall in the water, never swim, never put soap in water, nothing. I don't touch the water.

Kerllen Costa: This is why instead of swimming in the river like many others do, Steve takes his baths with buckets of cold water: his midnight yoga. But this respect doesn't exactly come from fear.

Steve Boyes: Like I call the hippos the guardians of these rivers, of these systems because they connect us to the water — makes us focus every second on the water.

[MUSIC BREAK]

Kerllen Costa: Connection might be the most important thing for Steve, linking the start of the water, the source lakes, with the Delta. Joining together people from all countries of the water system on one expedition. Binding the history of a place with the potential of its future. For him and the team, the thing that does this perhaps most profoundly are elephants.

Adjany Costa: This land was so famous because of its elephants and they were just as important as the diamonds in the country. That's gone. Over a hundred thousand elephants were completely eliminated. That piece of the puzzle that connected Angola to the rest of the world is gone.

Kerllen Costa: The team spotted and identified many animals on the journey. Of course, the hippos and the birds.

But as they near the border, the chances of seeing elephants became slimmer and slimmer.

Adjany Costa: I mean, we spend two months seeing tracks of animals, but not really seeing wildlife. And you kind of start wondering the amount of effort you'll have to put in to see one. Just one. And when hope was almost gone.

Kerllen Costa: Elephants.

Adjany Costa: We have elephants in Angola. We actually finally found them. This is amazing. It's really amazing.

It's a symbol that connects our past to our potential future.

Kerllen Costa: Riding on the euphoria from encountering elephants a few days later, the crew crossed the border over into Namibia. Although Namibia has the highest population density along the river, the water only runs through 60 kilometers of the country before another border crossing into Botswana. That's where the river widens and widens until it begins spreading across the land like an enormous hand. That hand is the delta.

Water Setlabosha: And I can smell, I can smell Delta now.

Steve Boyes: Add another 10 white faced duck, one yellow billed stork.

Kerllen Costa: For four months and 1500 kilometers, the team traced the water from Angola through Namibia down to Botswana.

Steve Boyes: We're now part of the water. We are now part of the system. We've been drinking this water four months. Our atoms or literally this place.

Kerllen Costa: As they made it to the edge of the delta where the water evaporates into sand, the team fell into each other's arms in hugs, exhaustion and tears.

Steve Boyes: Today was the fulfillment of a dream.

Water Setlabosha: Oh, I dreamed this place for a long time. Now we are right here. This is the place we're looking for.

Adjany Costa: I think that expedition bought this vision that Angola is worth it, that as an Angolan, I have the responsibility to help protect what is mine and what is ours, what is everyone's. And all of a sudden I saw myself spending my whole life working in Angola, specifically in the Okavango.

Kerllen Costa: By the end of the expedition, the team had discovered 38 new species in Angola and 24 potential new species to science, they had logged over 30000 geotagged wildlife sightings.

Adjany Costa: We need data to explain and to describe, which was very important at the time because there was no data, especially current data, modern data.

Kerllen Costa: But Adjany quickly learned that there was something far more powerful than data for inspiring people to take action. And she was right at the center of it. A really good story.

Gary Knell: I think I've seen the documentary about 17 times by now, so I could probably narrated myself.

Kerllen Costa: This is Gary Knell. He was the CEO of the National Geographic Society when Steve and Neil Gelinas's released the documentary.

Gary Knell: You know, I can't take credit for being the person who found Steve Boyes, but I think certainly when I did hear about this bigger dream and this bigger project, it absolutely inspired me as one that was a prototype for what National Geographic could be.

Kerllen Costa: This prototype Gary is talking about this, the documentary Steve and Neil ended up making about the expedition. It's called *Into The Okavango*. It was nominated for an Emmy and it screened at the Tribeca Film Festival. And the greater team won the 2019 Rolex National Geographic Explorer of the Year award.

As the documentary reached millions of viewers, suddenly, it wasn't just a ragtag team of explorers, scientists, and WaYei guides who wanted to protect the Okavango Delta. International donors, NGOs and average viewers watching the movie on in-flight entertainment and Disney Plus all felt moved to conserve the delta and its Source Lakes. The prestige and attention of the documentary even helped nudge US Congress to pass the Delta Act, a bill committing to protect the wildlife in and around the delta.

Adjany Costa: Everyone has a personal interest to be there. Everyone wants a piece of the landscape for themselves, whatever that means, whether it is money, but it is personal well-being, whether it is, you know, leaving a legacy.

Kerllen Costa: All this energy transformed Steve's ten thousand dollar research expedition into a 16 million dollar multinational conservation effort. National Geographic created a whole new project dedicated to conserving this wilderness called the National Geographic Okavango Wilderness Project, now known as NGOWP. And this project has become one of the top most funded projects in the National Geographic Society's 150 year history.

Steve became its leader and I became the Angola Country Director. While I'm still in charge of our photo trapping efforts, my primary role is guiding our relationship building

with local communities. I'm the translator between local people's desires and their concerns with the project

Regedora: *Luchaze*

Kerllen Costa: They are not saying that they don't want you to work there. They have reservations. They very much welcome you with both hands. And they're aware that the attention of the country, of the world is on the project to work here and to implement their ideas. So everyone is watching and they are watching.

Steve Boyes: Thank you very much.

Kerllen Costa: The more I listen to the villagers' concerns, myths and traditions, the more conflicted I feel about how an outside organization can best protect this place. That's why I pay such close attention to Mukisi.

José Vitanga: Mukisi. Conhecemos o Mukisi.

(transated) Mukisi, we know the Mukisi.

Kerllen Costa: I'm sitting with Jose Vitanga, a 78 year old elder who lived through the war in Tempué, a town in Eastern Angola. When Vitanga smilas you can see every single tooth in his mouth.

José Vitanga: Mukisi é se chama em Portugues um dragão.

(translated) Mukisi is like a dragon.

José Vitanga: Quer dizer ele vive na água.

(translated) I mean, it lives in the water.

José Vitanga: Ele também responde, você escuta

(translated) You hear the noise it makes.

José Vitanga: Click, click, click.

Kerllen Costa: Tem pessoas que já viu com os olhos mesmos?

(translated) Is there anyone who has actually seen Mukisi with their own eyes?

José Vitanga: A pessoa não pode ver com os olhos.

(translated) One cannot see it with their own eyes.

José Vitanga: Não vai viver com os olhos.

Kerllen Costa: Cómo sabe que existe?

(translated) So how do you know it exists?

José Vitanga: Aqui o milagre o ele faz.

(translated) Because of the miracles it performs, you will realize you are in his presence.

José Vitanga: Havia um grupo de crianças que ia fazer a circuncisão e quando foram levadas a lagoa para tomar banho, todas ficaram lá.

(translated) There was once a group of children, we're going to get circumcision done and when they were put in the lake to bathe, they all got stuck there. And nowadays when one gets to that lake, even if using a canoe, you won't go past the middle of the lake, you have to offer something to be able to get out.

Kerllen Costa: Is it crazy to call it dragon swallowing a group of children a miracle? To me, it sounds like it belongs in the list of threats that the expedition team faced.

But I think there is something more here. Wisdom that is hundreds of years old that can transform our way of thinking, from protect to respect.

When the cameras stop rolling and the boats are stored away, how do Steve, Koki, Water, Vitanga, the villagers of Tempué, and myself all come together? This podcast will follow what happens when worlds connect and at times collide.

Next time, we go looking for the lost ghost elephants of Angola and experience why finding them is so complicated.

You're listening to Guardians of the River, a podcast about the quest to safeguard one of the world's most remote and wild lands. I'm your host, Kerllen Costa. The story was written and recorded by Cat Jaffee and House of Pod in partnership with the National

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You can also find this podcast on Spotify, Google Play, Apple podcast, SoundCloud, Stitcher, or wherever you listen to great audio. We owe an enormous thanks to Neil Gelinas and Kaya Ensor for allowing us to use recordings from their documentary into the Okavango. Our fact checker is Aimee Machado. Our producer Juliette Luini. Our illustrator is Fernando Hugo Fernandes. Our audio editor and sound designer is Jason Patane. Our Angolan producer is myself, Kerllen Costa and our Motswana producer is Thelafung Charles. We had story editing help from Rebecca Mendoza Nunziato. And our composer is Victor Gama, who is also the voice ofJosé Vitanga. Sadly, José Vitanga passed away a few days after our interview, and we are so grateful to have had the chance to hear him speak.

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And for me, Kerllen, Moyo Weno.