

TONIC



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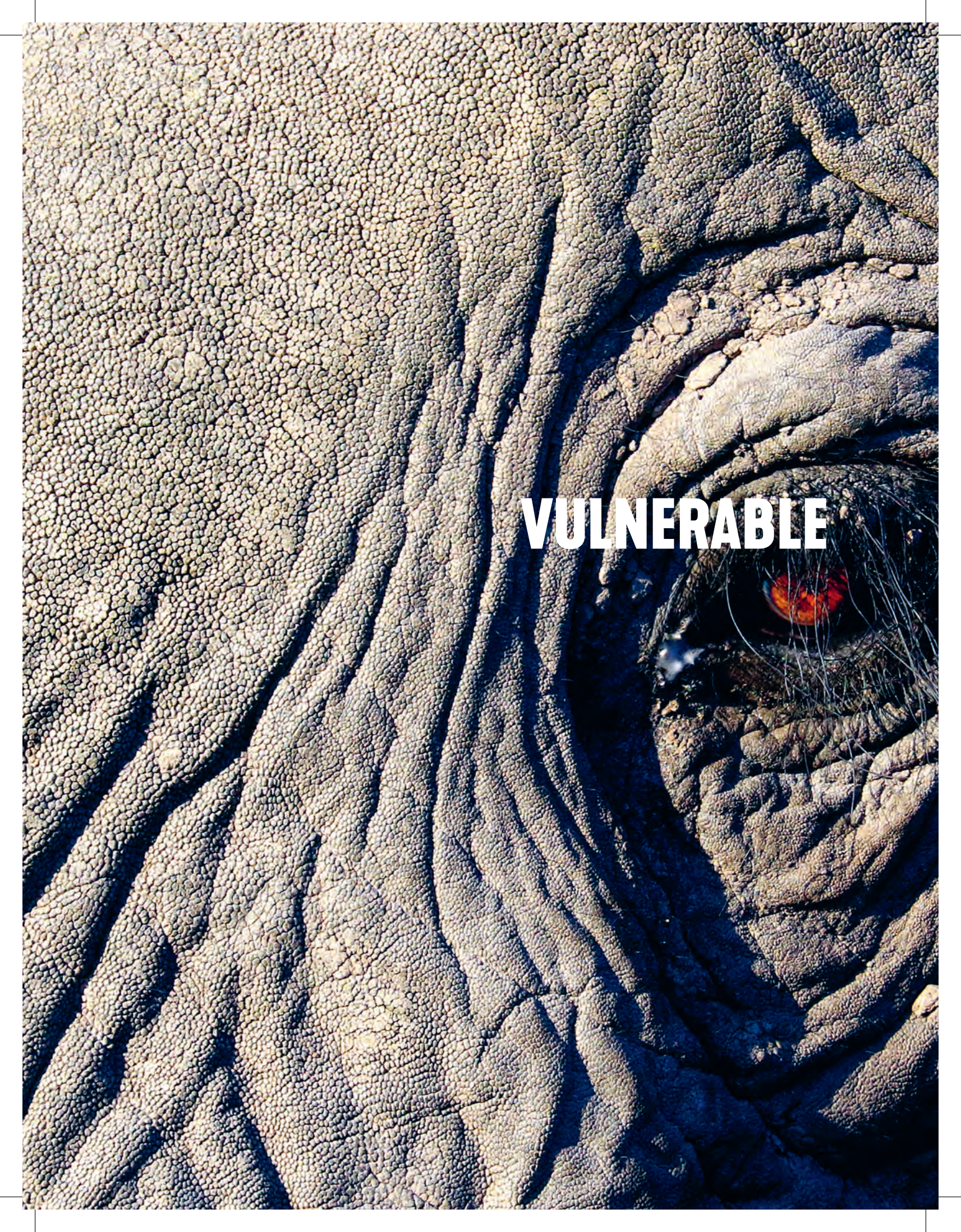
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A HEADY COCKTAIL OF DRINK, TRAVEL AND ADVENTURE

4
VOLUME



A close-up photograph of an elephant's head, focusing on its eye and the surrounding wrinkled skin. The skin is a mix of light brown and grey tones, with deep, vertical wrinkles running down the side of the face. The eye is partially visible, showing a reddish-brown iris and a dark pupil. The word "VULNERABLE" is superimposed in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the image, positioned over the elephant's eye and the surrounding skin.

VULNERABLE

AND ENDANGERED?

The recent closures of many well-known print titles, even those going for decades, only drive home how hard it is to make a magazine work. Tonic is a labour of love and is our way of championing great storytelling and photography. Your support means a lot. We will be here for as long as you'll have us. We hope you enjoy our fourth volume. Remember our playlist; we will leave the choice of drink to you.

Cheers, Rob and Benita.

THE MATRIARCH AND



THE MOCK CHARGE:

HOW FARMERS AND ELEPHANTS = BOTSWANAN CRAFT BEER

Words

Sue Watt

“What do people drink when they’re on safari?” Graham McCullough asks

me, not needing an answer. “They drink G&T, and they drink beer. Wouldn’t it be cool if we had a craft beer that every visitor to this country picks up and reads on the label: This is grown by local farmers living with elephants...?”

We’re chatting in the shady, bougainvillea-filled gardens of the Taproom, a real ale pub in Maun, the gateway town to Botswana’s famous Okavango Delta. The pub, which opened last August, fronts the Okavango Craft Brewery (OCB) established in 2019 with Graham as co-founder and director. Its story is born of hope and innovation, its raison d’être to save elephants and simultaneously improve the lives of local people.

Craft breweries are rare in Botswana, the only competition being the Big Sip in the capital, Gaborone. What’s also rare is that all OCBs beers are made with millet.

“I grew up on Guinness, so I insisted we do an Irish stout!” Graham says with a smile and a distinct Dublin lilt as he sips a robust-looking Old Bull Stout. I have a deliciously smooth Delta lager and my partner Will chooses a Panhandle Pale Ale that’s the colour of caramel. All the draught beers have names linked to the area or its elephants. The Matriarch is a popular and punchy 6% American Amber Ale. The cleverly-called Mock Charge is alcohol-free, created during Botswana’s Covid ban on alcohol. And there’s Kingfisher, a Session IPA named after the vibrantly-hued Malachite kingfisher often seen flitting around the waterways.

From June, when the floods arrive from Angola, the Okavango Delta doubles in size, spanning 15,000km² of watery wonderland with palm-tree islands and snaking channels that fizzle out in the Kalahari sands, never reaching the sea. The world's largest inland delta draws myriad wildlife to its fertile lands, including some 200,000 elephants, the largest population on the planet.

We'd already seen hundreds of them on our safari, where we stayed at the new Khwai Leadwood camp near Moremi Game Reserve in the heart of the Delta. Lone old bulls lumbered across the plains and breeding herds of wise matriarchs, their sisters and daughters, mooched past us with comical toddlers struggling to control their wayward trunks, and bolshy teenagers, in tow.

I'm mesmerised by these beautiful giants of the bush, enthralled by their intelligence and empathy, their strength and their gentleness. I could watch them for hours from the comfort of our Land Cruiser.

They don't look the same if you're a farmer living on the edge of poverty and struggling to grow food for your family: when pachyderms and people share the same space, the consequences can be catastrophic.

The main crop in this semi-arid environment is millet, providing consistent harvests regardless of climatic conditions. Unfortunately, it's a crop that's favoured by elephants too.

"Predominantly, the cause of conflict is crop-raiding by elephants, and people get charged and sometimes killed," Graham explains. "You've got to protect your field if you live in a landscape with elephants."

Graham and his wife Dr Anna Songhurst, co-founders of NGO Ecoexist, lived with farmers in the Delta's remote Panhandle region for 10 years, making use of their respective research in community development and human-elephant conflict. "Even I don't really understand how farmers feel when elephants destroy their crops, because I've never grown food for my family. And I've never lost a relative to an elephant. But there are solutions that can reduce conflict and also generate a value in elephants, helping people to live with them."

This is where the Okavango Craft Brewery comes in.



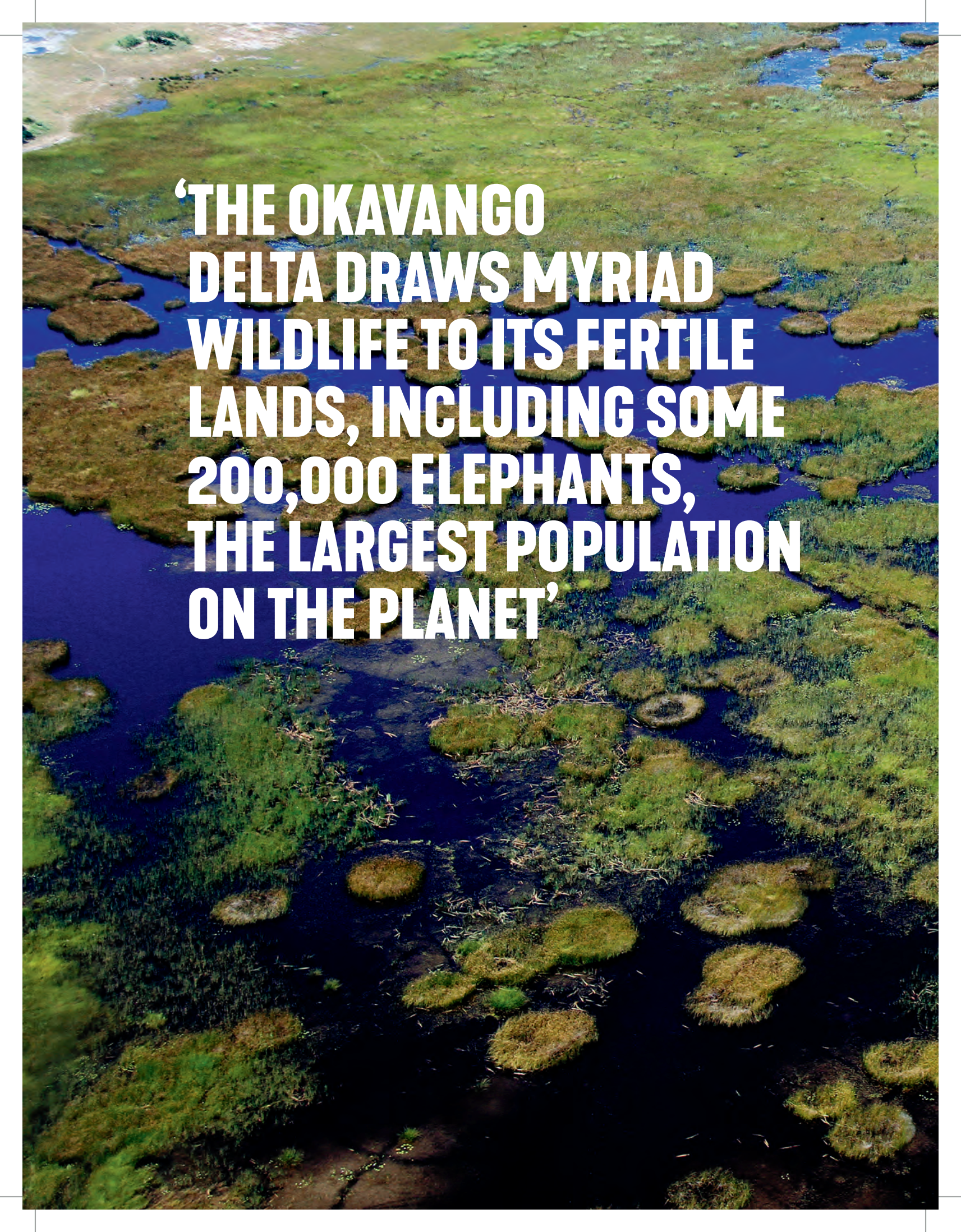
Thousands of Okavango's elephants are migratory, moving along ancient pathways as they have done for centuries. Anna's research proved the biggest driver of conflict was farming plots that obstructed these elephant corridors. Ecoexist persuaded land authorities to develop field clusters of up to 800 hectares, often with hundreds of plots, where farmers could safely grow their produce away from elephant paths. They made farming more sustainable, adopting conservation agricultural practices with intensive farming in smaller areas that achieve a greater yield. They taught 'elephant aware' farmers about ground cover and crop rotation and helped protect their plots from marauding neighbours with chilli fences (elephants hate chillies), flashing solar lights and solar electric fences.

"Sustainable farming takes more effort and resources," Graham explains, "So as a reward for all this extra work and for living with elephants, we wanted to create a market whereby farmers could get a premium price for their surplus millet. And that set the scene for the brewery."

Graham turned to Heine du Toit, a South African food scientist who came up with the idea of craft beer. "It's been four years of working out how to do it. We started from scratch, malting the millet, then roasting it and initially adding it to speciality malts from Europe as an adjunct, at first with very low percentages of millet. Now we're up to 50% in some beers."

OCB's Head Brewer, Murray Stephenson, is also making 100% millet beer. "It's been made here for centuries, although that's a different type of beer altogether," continues Graham, "We went to see traditional millet beer makers: it was fascinating because they just use natural yeasts self-propagated from the grain and the air. Murray is brewing sour beer just using that yeast and it's been dry-hopped with marula fruit, an indigenous tree with citrus flavours. It's been sitting in a barrel for 12 months now and it tastes amazing! We're going to put it into champagne bottles as a "premium" premium craft beer."

Taproom manager Jonathan Pierce gives us a tour of the brewery, full of shiny steel kegs, pipes and fermentation tanks contrasting with the old wooden barrel of 100% millet beer in pride of place.



**‘THE OKAVANGO
DELTA DRAWS MYRIAD
WILDLIFE TO ITS FERTILE
LANDS, INCLUDING SOME
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THE LARGEST POPULATION
ON THE PLANET’**



The pub carries on the brewery theme, with exposed pipes and beer taps coming directly from kegs in the cold room, visible through windows dividing the two areas. The customers are a mixed crowd, young and old, black and white, families sat near the kids' playground in the garden, couples sat close together, all enjoying the relaxing vibe with a soundtrack of soft reggae.

Along with award-winning craft beers, smiling bar staff sell specials like the Valentine's Day Raspberry Sour, Sentinel Gin and Tonic on tap, and Mowana cider, the local name for the baobab tree (one ingredient is baobab powder with its distinctive cream of tartar kick). Some tables have the 'tasting boat' of four beers ranging from inky black to gold, resting in a replica mokoro, the delta's traditional dugout canoe. Others have platters of food from the kitchen – hearty burgers, pizzas, and even a Delta lager ice cream.

This lively buzz around the brewery has been a long time coming. "We got our first batch of beer in February 2020," Graham says. "Thanks to Covid, we get the medal for the worst timing for a new business! But we've had huge support from locals, they're really proud that there's this product grown by farmers in the Okavango with water from the Delta: that's massive. It's very rare. And it's really exciting."

But OCB isn't sitting on its laurels. In this 'win-win' situation, more 'elephant aware' farmers are coming on board and Ecoexist are extending their scalable model to other regions. Tourism is getting involved too, with Helicopter Horizons, a Maun-based company, offering flights from luxury lodges to the remote communities for sensitive village visits. The brewery itself plans to diversify to other beverages and locally grown food, to expand into supplying lodges, and even exporting to the international market.

"We want to get the story out there," Graham says, "to export the awareness and potential to share benefits that reward farmers who live with massive herds of elephants."

Sigma's upbeat song "Hope" fills the Taproom as we leave: fittingly, it's all about positivity and aspiration. "If this was purely a business we'd have closed down months ago," Graham says passionately, "But it's about a dream and a vision. And the only reason we're still going is because we believe this shows what can be done for the conservation of elephants and the betterment of people in these amazing areas of Africa."

Saving Okavango's elephants one sip at a time – that's surely worth a celebratory pint of Matriarch Ale or a Delta Lager... 

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MILLET BEER MAKERS JUST USE
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