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A Shattered Stereotype

When you look at the blue wildebeest, you see a shattered stereotype. The blue wildebeest is native to a continent ravaged unfairly by climate change–Africa. Humanity often writes off this continent with negative stereotypes that are unfortunately truthful in many cases. Africa is stereotypically known to be poor, hungry, thirsty, underdeveloped, underserved, full of disease, and disconnected from the rest of the world. The depressing truth of these stereotypes is further exacerbated by climate change. While people, plants, and animals alike in Africa are struggling under the effects of climate change, some animals show resilience in the face of adversity. Despite living in a cataclysmic environment with less than opportune surroundings, the blue wildebeest show that as animals, they can band together and make powerful progress towards thriving amidst daunting situations. They shatter the stereotype of African life being bleak and helpless. As humans, there is a lot that we can learn from the blue wildebeest–as well as other people–who find power in times of peril.

Before diving into what humans can learn from the blue wildebeest, it is essential to start by diving into how dire of a situation Africa faces at the moment. According to an infographic from George Washington University's Milken Institute of Public Health, the greater majority of African nations are shown to be highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change despite making a minimal contribution to carbon dioxide emissions. Climate change is disrupting the lives of many Africans, but on top of this, much African wildlife and plant species are struggling to thrive with the climate crisis. According to a botanical journal article written by McClean et al., models

suggest that over 5,000 African plant species will be forced to move in location or elevation due to climate-related changes in precipitation, soil, and temperature. This disruption of plant life affects animal life, too, in a unique way. The African Wildlife Foundation describes how a combination of plant life migration and mass deforestation in the continent can heavily damage the habitat lands of African wildlife. With all of this being said, almost every species on the African continent is susceptible to vulnerability as a result of climate change.

Keyword–almost. Enter the blue wildebeest. Blue wildebeest are native to some of the most affected parts of Africa, yet they show resilience, community, and collaboration can improve the world around them. Despite living in affected areas of the African continent, this animal is listed in the "Least Concern" category of endangerment on National Geographic. How are they able to achieve this with damaged habitats and depleted resources?

The wildebeests of Africa show high levels of resilience amidst hardship. By banding together in huge migratory groups, over 1.5 million wildebeests migrate roughly 1,000 miles annually in search of food and water while creating a spectacle that National Geographic describes as one of the "Seven Wonders of the Natural World." The steely wildebeests show little to no quit as they move through the damaged continent in pursuit of finding nourishment–all while crossing through many crocodile-infested rivers and lion-populated planes (National Geographic). These dangerous expeditions are not in vain, however. The migratory patterns of these wildebeest not only improve their well-being but also improve the areas that the wildebeest grange and run on. According to an article written by Greg Geraci, and published by the University of Michigan's Museum of Zoology, blue wildebeest fertilize the lands they graze, leaving these lands better than how the wildebeest found them. In all of the above examples of the behavior and characteristics of the blue wildebeest, it is clear that humanity has much to learn from their example.

As people, we need to build community. As people, we must be willing to courageously traverse tough treks in search of replenishment. As people, it is our responsibility to be courteous enough to leave areas better than how we found them. Thankfully, these people exist, and thankfully, my cohort and I have had the opportunity to read the works of some of these people. Authors such as Sherri Mitchell, Leah Penniman, Wangari Maathai, and Toney McTeer write about how important community and inclusion are in the field of climate science. Greta Thunberg, Janine Benyus, and Emily Atkin lead by example to show how to follow an arduous path for meaningful purposes. Judith Schwartz, Jane Zelikova, and Emily Johnston taught the significance of leaving a place better than they found them. The combination of these powerful, beautiful minds stampeding towards an improved planet and lifestyle reminded me of the blue wildebeests.

Similar to how the blue wildebeests band together to progress over many daunting miles, these people have come together–in ideology and purpose–to push humanity towards greener pastures, literally and metaphorically. Additionally, these brilliant authors and activists follow the lead of the blue wildebeest to show that stereotypes can be shattered. All the authors are women, and many belong to other demographics stereotypically left out or affected more by climate change: Black, young, Indigenous, etc. Despite coming from a demographic(s) that have been disproportionately excluded from or affected by climate change, they still choose to use their powerful voices for humanitarian purposes within this sector. I personally am not particularly religious, but I pray to whatever gods may be that the rest of humanity recognizes the importance and meaning behind these people's work while following the examples set by the blue wildebeest. I hope that recognizing this will allow the rest of humanity to find love and compassion for the earth, and I hope that this love will allow the rest of the population to find ways to move away from the behaviors and ideologies that make humanity so damaging to our home planet. This is a stereotype that I am eager to shatter.

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