

LES GENS BIEN PRODUCTIONS PRESENT

THE MYSTERY OF THE OKAVANGO

SAVING THE EMERALD DELTA

DOCUMENTARY - 52' / 90'
DIRECTED BY ELENA SENDER & ALEXIS BARBIER-BOUVET

france.tv

LES
GENS
BIEN
PRODUCTIONS

CNC

LOGLINE

In the heart of Botswana, the Okavango Delta is in peril. An invisible threat looms over this extraordinary jewel of biodiversity: it's drying up and its waters are poisoned with heavy metals. In response to the crisis, a team of scientists has embarked on a race against time. And their discovery defies belief: the delta is literally collapsing.



SYNOPSIS

A scientific thriller at the heart of an ecosystem in peril

Deep in the Kalahari Desert, the Okavango Delta is a unique place where elephants, lions, buffaloes and crocodiles coexist. But this paradise is in peril. Trees, hit by unexplained dessication, stand petrified like statues, the waters are tainted with arsenic... What is it that's threatening one of Earth's last sanctuaries?

A specialised team of Botswanan and French scientists, led by **Nashaat Mazrui** and **Mike Murray-Hudson**, embarks on a gripping investigation. These chemists, geologists, hydrologists and geoarchaeologists are trying to understand what's happening, before it's too late. Why is the water disappearing? Where's the pollution coming from? And are these two phenomena connected?

The investigation leads them to a first, astonishing discovery. Lake Makgadikgadi, which vanished 10,000 years ago, has returned to haunt the delta. Loaded with heavy metals, its underground springs may be the cause of the waters' contamination.

But that merely scratches the surface of the Delta's deepening crisis. To their astonishment, the researchers discover that a tectonic plate of the Great African Rift is subsiding. The Okavango's floor is slowly, but inexorably, tilting eastwards, diverting its waters toward a neighbouring river. **Within a century, the delta could empty out and turn back into desert.**



How can local populations prepare for the challenges ahead? Geoarchaeologists are unearthing valuable lessons from the past: the first humans here managed to adapt to similar landscape changes. Meanwhile, geologists and chemists are developing practical solutions to monitor the delta in real time, filter the poison from its waters and reduce conflict over water access between local communities and wildlife.

The *Mystery of the Okavango* combines a captivating scientific investigation, a powerful human story and breathtaking natural beauty to reveal the hidden forces shaping our planet - in order to sound the alarm and save one of the world's last great natural treasures.





DIRECTORS NOTE

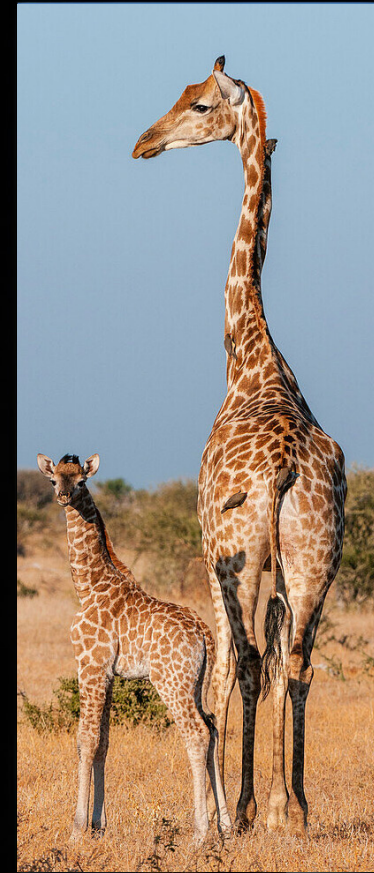
This film unfolds as an immersive scientific thriller set in one of our planet's last wild sanctuaries. It moves from sweeping landscapes and vibrant wildlife, to the enigmas of subsurface exploration, to the protagonists' inner lives; shifting between the beauty of the earth and the dangers lurking below.

By reinventing the conventions of science documentaries, the film will transport the viewer into a breathless exploration of the geological mysteries shaping the Okavango Delta. It will draw on the visual language of thrillers, with tight, fast-paced editing, multi-screen compositions, subjective animal-eye POV shots, extreme macro close-ups and on-the-ground, first-person accounts. This approach pays tribute to the splendour of this UNESCO World Heritage site while building a threatening, unsettling atmosphere. An innovative visual style, combined with elements of augmented reality, will make the unfathomable forces that shape this territory visible, to gradually reveal the secrets buried beneath the beauty and allow us to travel through time.

To conduct the investigation, researchers will deploy cutting-edge scientific tools: LIDAR, ground-penetrating radar, Doppler, chemical analyses, GPS tracking... They'll also rely on the latest-generation satellites and space programs. And because the Delta is a one-of-a-kind ecosystem, the team pushes boundaries, pioneering ground-breaking solutions: seismic monitoring via elephant footfall and water purification through biochar filtration. These bold innovations are designed to help us understand and safeguard this remarkable wilderness.

But the film goes beyond technical innovation to celebrate the women and men who've devoted their lives to the Delta. The deeply human and intimate narrative shows how essential close teamwork is. Water becomes a protagonist in its own right. Sometimes nurturing, sometimes threatening, it symbolises the delicately balanced ecosystem. The narrative flows, fluid and organic as the Delta's currents. Each discovery brings a new question; each answer reveals an even deeper mystery.

Elena Sender
Alexis Barbier-Bouvet



PRODUCERS NOTE

Since its creation, *Les Gens Bien Productions* has developed a distinctive, committed editorial vision, centred on major science, ecology, and human exploration stories. We believe that documentaries can be powerful tools for understanding the world, but only if we fully immerse ourselves in the places where we film, listen deeply to their inhabitants and tell their stories with precision, sensitivity, and care.

The Mystery of the Okavango is in keeping with this approach. Elena Sender presented the project to us after a meeting with a CNRS research team in Rennes. It's an extraordinary scientific story: how one of the last natural sanctuaries on the planet is now threatened by invisible tectonic forces, far older than humanity, which are reawakening. This is a gripping, urgent investigation with major ramifications for humans and the environment.

The quality of the treatment and the power of the story convinced us immediately. By closely following an interdisciplinary team - chemists, hydrologists, geologists, geoarchaeologists - the film reveals a deeply alarming chain of events: **the Okavango could literally empty out within a few decades, drained by a slow tilting of the subsurface.** In parallel, underground springs are poisoning village drinking water with toxic salts from a vanished ancient lake. These are two silent, but very real threats.

Two dedicated individuals drive the story: Kenyan chemist Nashaat Mazrui, who's based in Botswana, and Mike Murray-Hudson, a hydrologist specialising in the Delta. Their intertwined viewpoints,

deep-rooted connection to the land and personal commitment give the film a profoundly human resonance that takes us beyond the science.

To bring this story to the screen, the directing team of **Elena Sender and Alexis Barbier-Bouvet** was the obvious choice. With their experience co-directing documentaries for France Télévisions and ARTE France, they combine scientific rigour, narrative skill, and field expertise. Alexis, a specialist in wildlife shoots, brings a sharp sense of pacing, visual composition, and logistical know-how. Elena, with her background as a science journalist, shapes the story with precision and clarity. Their complementary strengths are a major asset for this film which is rich with layers of meaning.

The Mystery of the Okavango is an immersive, rigorously documented film; a tightly paced investigation brought to life through thriller-inspired direction, precise and effective animation, powerful on-location footage, and an unwavering commitment to sharing scientific knowledge. Each sequence unfolds like a scientific thriller, building suspense through mystery, discovery, and narrative tension.

Beyond its scientific focus, this film raises a fundamental question: how can we protect an area as iconic as the Okavango Delta when it's threatened by the Earth itself?

**Rébecca Hagège
Vivien Lemaignan**

AVAILABLE FROM JANUARY 2027

CONTACTS

REBECCA HAGEGE
PRODUCER

+ 33 (0) 6 65 84 21 90
rebecca@lgbprod.fr

VIVIEN LEMAIGNAN
PRODUCER

+ 33 (0) 6 14 02 47 79
vivien@lgbprod.fr