

Baboon gives diet experts food for thought

July 29 2013 at 10:23am

[Comment on this story](#)



INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPERS

File photo: Jenni Trethowan of Baboon Matters visits baboons near Redhill. The students also found that nearly half the calories the baboons consumed came from exotics like pines and oaks. Picture: Rogan Ward

Related Stories

- [Monkey business linked to lack of water](#)
- [Primates do monkey around](#)
- [Cape baboon troops flourishing - report](#)

Cape Town - A local baboon had access to human foods high in fat, sugar and protein – but unlike many humans, indulged in a varied, balanced diet, a study has found.

Students from City University of New York (Cuny) and the University of Sydney observed a female baboon in the Tokai Forest of Table Mountain National Park for 30 days to study her dietary habits.

“Her dietary intake was at an extraordinary level of detail that allowed detection of dietary regulation from one day to the next.

“The female baboon’s intake of indigenous foods, exotic foods and human-derived foods showed she could balance her diet over the 30-day period, showing remarkable nutritional wisdom in the face of exposure to an unnatural diet,” the study found.

Professor Larissa Swedell, in the Doctoral Faculty in Anthropology and Biology at Cuny, and students Cayley Johnson, David Clarke and Brad Rebeiro observed the baboon when she left her sleeping tree in the morning at 8am and continued until she went to sleep at 6pm.

“The natural diet included 58 percent of herbaceous leaves, 15 percent mushrooms, 15 percent nuts and seeds, nine percent underground storage organs, two percent fruits, and (the balance) flowers like lichens, stems and other minor items,” Swedell said.

“The baboon’s diet also included 16 human-derived food items, which together comprised seven percent of the total diet. Human-derived foods contributed eight percent of total dietary energy intake, while exotic plant species (included in the “natural” foods category) such as pine nuts and acorns contributed 44 percent of the total energy intake,” she said.

Swedell said because the scraps (discarded food from picnics) are high in fat, sugar and protein, it was thought the baboon would find them more attractive than the regular vegetation diet.

“But unlike many humans, the baboon did not overindulge. Over a 30 days, she had a balanced of indigenous plants, exotic species and human-derived foods,” she said.

They also found that nearly half the calories the baboons consumed came from exotics like pines and oaks. If these were removed, the baboons would eventually search for human foods, “and that could lead to conflict with people”.

“The subject consumed 69 naturally occurring food items from 29 species during the 30 days,” Swedell said. – Cape Times