

● The Cape lions are gone and many other animals. If the baboons and I never had to see you all ever again, we would also be quite happy. Go live elsewhere.

Better deal for baboons

SINCE I've lived in Scarborough for the past 16 years, I thought it was appropriate to attend the recent Big Baboon Meeting in Tokai.

Coming from a community where the majority are against killing and most of our children are adept at chasing off baboons in a barefoot style, I also see it as a social responsibility. Plato, the fourth century BCE philosopher, said: "The price of apathy towards public affairs is to be ruled by evil men."

As I sat at a table bearing the label "Activist", I was thinking of a resolution of transparency and the vital questions to ask this panel of experts, scientists, researchers, a veterinarian, and waste management experts.

One of the oldest codes of ethics on our planet is ahimsa, the practice of non-violence or non-harm. The question of ahimsa set off an alarm. Marlene Laros was praiseworthy as a referee. She awarded three red cards to the authorities for being "out of line" in their attack.

A big surprise was the SPCA. Last year the NSPCA and IUCT Ethics Committee turned down the Baboon Research Unit's proposal for paintballs and bear-bangers as manage-

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ment tools because they were in violation of animal welfare. A year later paintballs were everywhere. In response the SPCA deftly executed a "Bend it to BBE", with a conservation ethic as flexible as an Olympic gymnast. While Guy Hawkes was banned on the South Peninsula because fire-works traumatise humans and pets, the BRU "Standard Operating Procedure paintball doc" was amended and SPCA approved. It felt like "Judas" in the pocket. I swallowed a stone.

Whatever cosmetic nips and tucks to the BRU's document, the questions

remain. How will wild animals survive if we give them nowhere in the wild to live? Violent and lethal conservation is untenable. Conservationists with a licence to kill are like ouroboros eating its own tail.

Clavin Bell told us bluntly: "The value of nature-based tourism in the Cape Peninsula is worth R2 to R6 billion a year." Elzette Jordaan of the city showed us a slide of a baboon with open jaws baring its teeth, a clichéd fanged monster. Jordaan said they used "deliberate shock tactics" but were doing a make-over on their PR campaign, changing "Baboons are wild and dangerous" to "Keep our baboons wild and safe", because of the negative impact on tourists who found baboon brochures scary.

I suspect I was not the only one in the room scared by the R36 000 per baboon per year statistic.

It took all day for the authorities to present their facts: an overwhelming barrage with banal repetition that did not prove the efficacy (of aversion tools and killing), but showed an abandoned wildlife ethic which neglects the sacredness of nature.

And the consequences? Have we thought it through? Psychologically,

violent conservation is divisive and explicitly a bad example for children.

I left dehydrated, feeling brain-dead and worried about our wildlife. Legislation that protects them from commercial exploitation probes another cold and empty void. South Africa's wild animals are a huge attraction and resource. Elephant ivory? Ostrich purses? Canned hunting? The big five heads to hang on walls? Rhino horns for aphrodisiacs and cure-alls? Hedonism and debauchery feed corporate greed? The chacma baboon may be a small cherry on top but everything and every being plays a role to make the circle of life complete.

There are realistic, pragmatic solutions. Jenny Treshowan of Baboon Matters Trust is testimony to management with no paintballs or killing. There are alternative global models of merciful wildlife strategies. I propose an agenda that allows the presentation of a positive example for peer review.

What citizens want is transparency, accountability and environmental reform. This will take us a long way towards peace on Earth.

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