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## Teeth bared in battle over baboon control

Authorities, activists square off over whether to kill problem animals after release of new protocol, writes **JOHN YELD**

**B**RITISH scientist Wynson Oates is credited with the famous aphorism "to see jaw is always better than to see war", made at a White House luncheon in June 1964. And the SPCA had something similar in mind when it hosted its all-day Baboon Welfare Meeting in Tlokelo this week.

While some disagreements over how to manage the Peninsula's baboon troops may not have reached actual "warfare", set opponents have come close to exchanging blows at times, and charges and counter-charges of unethical practices have been laid.

The opening salvo in a legal battle, if not a war, over the killing of "problem" baboons have already been fired.

So the SPCA called for the full-day dialogue in an attempt to reduce tensions and find some common ground.

For Elizabeth Marlene Larosa said baboon management was "a very significant issue".

"A really good outcome of the meeting will be if we all understand each other — we're not trying to come up with imagined solutions."

Disagreements are acute following the introduction of a new baboon management protocol by the three statutory authorities involved — Cape Nature, City of Cape Town and SA National Parks.

The protocol is being applied by the new baboon manager, Human Wildlife Solutions, which won the new baboon management contract a few months ago.

At issue are "lethal" techniques being applied to cull, and keep baboons out of urban areas, such as those of potholes, traps and "bear bangers", and — especially — the killing of baboons mostly adult males considered to be habitual raiders in urban areas, and a threat to human welfare and safety.

Some animal activists and baboon conservationists are strongly opposed to these methods, and are questioning in particular whether killing is necessary to achieve the protocol's intended goals, and whether the protocol is being applied as prescribed.

But the authorities, critical representatives of residents and the groups in the Peninsula: the Baboon Liaison Group, researchers and the SPCA are all in favour of the new strategy.

Questions at the meeting included: "Is it ethically justifiable to kill 'problem' baboons reducing raiding?" "Is data from the baboon management service provider and researcher accurate?" and "How is the effectiveness and safety of the baboon management methods tracked?"

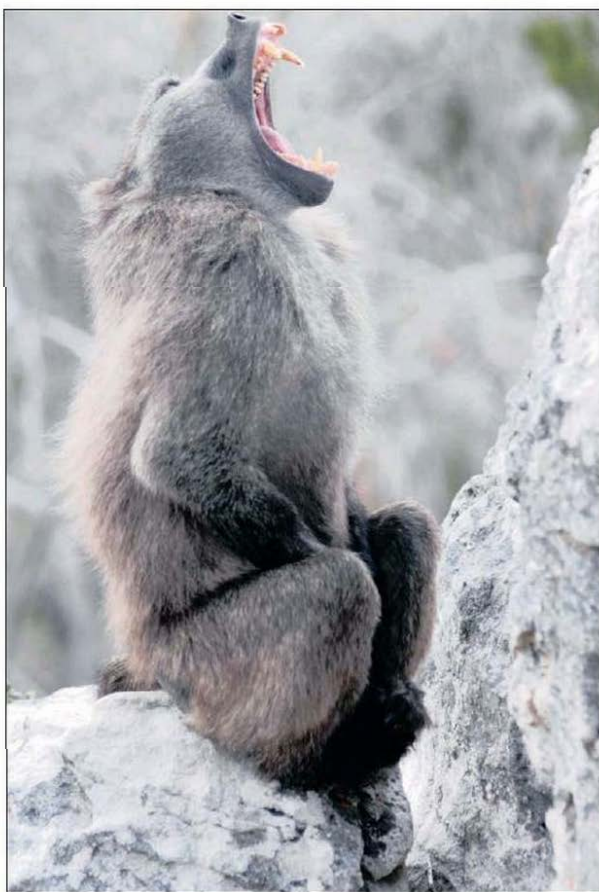
But Clancy Gwynne of the Cape of Good Hope SPCA Wildlife Unit, said the main reason for the meeting was to "help everyone understand the same page".

"For me it's all criticism, or criticism, or criticism — there's nothing for me. The reality is that sometimes criticism is necessary. If you don't agree, come with a realistic, pragmatic solution."

Let's try and set forward some real solutions, instead of criticism," he emphasized.

The workshop does appear to be working, at least judging by the number of calls to the "Baboon Hotline".

In Phil Richardson, head of Human Wildlife Solutions, told the meeting that in September last year there'd been 19 raid-related calls,



**TAKE HIM OUT!** A senior member of the De Gama troop which lives in the mountains near Glencairn village displays his impressive teeth. **PHOTO: ROSS VAN WARD**

and 120 in October. In the same time interval this year that number had dropped to 15 and 48 respectively. Analysing the calls during October, Richardson said 57 percent

were to report baboons in urban areas, 4 percent to complain of baboons raiding rubbish bins, 4 percent were about baboons attacking pets, 12 percent were about

baboons raiding an occupied house, 2 percent were about baboons "howling and entering" a house, and 15 percent were about baboons threatening or attacking people.

"That is really unacceptable behaviour," he said. He added it had been a management error in the past not to have baboons removed that attacked and

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interacted people and that taught such behaviour to other baboons as it becomes a "self-perpetuating event".

Richardson also said his company had offered "management" letters, phone calls and e-mails praising and thanking them for their efforts.

"People are saying they can live with it, they can garden again, their children can come to visit them — all because of our use of potholes, traps and I admit euthanasia," he said.

At the same time, one of the major problems at issue — no baboons had been killed. But the use of potholes and traps had kept the troop out of this area completely since the beginning of the month.

The "very bad raiders" had been removed from the main Scarborough troop in late July and since August not a single baboon had been in the village.

At the Baboon Welfare Meeting, Richardson pointed out that almost none of all the reported raids had involved the "bad" baboons, TK21 and TK22, which have now been killed.

"The selective removal of baboons is highly effective, and I believe the figures (or ratios) will now have been greatly reduced."

He suggested that while baboons caused minimal physical harm to people, the psychological harm could be significant, particularly for children who could be traumatised.

"If you kill baboons, there is no problem, but some people are terrified of them and you do have potential damage. I don't think that is a solution."

City of Cape Town veterinarian Dr Elizabeth Jordan added that she couldn't ignore the welfare issue of people involved.

Richardson said no one involved expected killing baboons.

"That's generally accepted, that I think personally that if a baboon probably jumps on you and tries to remove your backdoor or tries to remove your food, that's a significant health risk," he argued.

Simon Janse van Rie, chairman of the Baboon Matters Trust, an citizens' watchdog group, which is a former municipal management service provider, said there was a lack of trust between all the groups involved because of a lack of information.

"For me, that's what needs to be done. The trust had not been able to get sufficient information to judge whether the management protocol was working, and to hold management accountable to make sure the animals were not being killed unnecessarily."

the group wanted documented proof that killing problem baboons was the reason for the improved situation.

She pointed out that during the trial the group had benefited because of the five in keeping baboons out of urban areas.

"We used the methodology no baboons were killed and there were no urban raids," she said.

She agreed that the current service provider had experienced "a dramatic turn", but questioned the reasons for this, saying that the previous killing of baboons had resulted in "no significant difference" in the amount of raiding.

Baboon activist Thina Mthembu, who has been accused the author of "a leading opinion" on imposing the new protocol, and of providing incorrect data.

"We don't trust what the researchers and managers say. I am extremely distrustful of the statistics and the methodology."

Associate professor and head of the Department of Zoology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, described Mthembu as "the elephant in the room".

"A member of the public says 'I don't trust the scientist. It's an issue. It's why I don't get anywhere,'" he said.

Larosa said to appear before the activists. "The issue is about data being shared. It's an important principle."

Janse van Rie of the Baboon Matters Trust accused the author of "a leading opinion" of "misinformation" and "misleading" citizens who tried to get information. This "misinformation" was "very misleading".

"I don't think this is a fair trial. It would completely be the opposite."

Chern also complained that the baboon management authorities were not being sufficiently accountable, and that citizens to get information from them had resulted in "a lot of problems being reported".

"As a citizen of South Africa who pays my taxes, I demand a level of accountability. I'm still not convinced that killing animals will resolve this issue," he said.

Richardson said the new protocol had been followed in the past three months that his company had been operating, and that this was documented.

O'Ryan pointed out the protocol had been approved by the Baboon Liaison Group, and his research unit and from all stakeholders.

There was no outcome. "However, galling it may be to scientists and administrators, we're allowed to ask questions, and of course."

"It's our constitutional right. It's our right to ask the authorities. What happened to this particular baboon? And why weren't you talking to the public about it?"

Janse van Rie said that urban raiding tactics, like potholes, traps, had to be used in conjunction with other methods such as the enforcement of the city by law, fines for trespassing, and education.

"That's what we need to really be doing. We need more investment, include it in the budget."

And "concerned citizen" Phil Meyer said everyone had to remember that the protocol was "just a piece of paper" and proposed that the limited at least "We're dealing with this of follow-up on this project," she said.

There was some concrete talk during the meeting, but it seems probable that it will be a temporary truce in the near future to be a very drawn-out, and debilitating conflict. **JOHN YELD**