

# Baboon control methods unethical

JENNIFRE THOWAN

I HAVE spent almost half of my life involved in issues relating to the plight of the baboons on the Cape peninsula. In that time I have dealt with many injuries to and deaths of these animals.

The majority of injuries I dealt with were as a direct result of humans – baboons hit by vehicles, shot, or poisoned. I have captured baboons so severely injured it was difficult to know where to hold them without causing more pain.

Most recently I sat with a female baboon as she lay dying. She was on a roof, away from the troop and retching violently – so ill and alone. So I sat quietly with her, and to my amazement this sick little baboon reached out her hand and grasped my own – her icy fingers clutching on to my human hand. Perhaps she, like many dying humans, just wanted a small degree of comfort; perhaps she just wanted contact – not to be alone. I'll never know, but her action moved me profoundly.

Although many of my experiences with injured or dying baboons have been upsetting, I have (to a degree) been able to rationalise them – perhaps people act in ignorance, unaware of the results of their often impetuous actions. The person who shot the female baboon we called Golden Arrow probably had no idea that her two-day-old infant would starve to death as a result of his angry action. The person who shot Harry (the large male of Slangkop troop) with a pellet gun probably had agonising thoughts of his death.

I don't excuse these aggressive acts, but I believe that if people genuinely knew what pain and suffering they caused they would stop hurting the baboons. As a result, I have done as many talks as I can, educating people to the fact that hurting animals does not solve the problems. If hurting or killing animals had achieved any long-term success then surely, logically we would not have to contend with the same hundred-year-old problems.

It is one thing to see the anxiety of the baboon family



SPEAK UP: Silence will be taken as approval, warns Jenni Thowan. PICTURE: HENK KRUGER

when humans act ignorantly – it is quite another to accept acts of deliberate harm.

In the past months I have tried to come to terms with the actions inflicted on the Peter Troop of Da Gama Park. In 2008 a small group of baboons led by Peter and Sebastian separated from the main troop and struck off on their own – a natural fission according to the experts. Our advice to keep the troop together was ignored.

The fission troop was allowed to move off, and so Peter, Big Mamma, Sebastian,

Crookie and Lady Godiva took their offspring and roamed from Fish Hoek to Simon's Town.

In 2010 Carpenter joined the group. But by 2012 the experts advised that this little unit was not a fission troop after all, but in fact a splinter troop and so after nearly four years apart there was an effort to push the troops back together.

It did not go well; baboons have a hierarchical social structure and neither male nor female baboon would give up their rank willingly. In

addition, one service provider had ended their contract to manage the monitors, creating a gap before the current service provider took up the post. The City of Cape Town did its best but had limited resources.

During the gap, the Baboon Technical Team decided that Peter and Carpenter's raiding habits had suddenly become untenable. In two separate and deliberate actions, the troop was actively pushed onto Table Mountain National Park land under instruction from the technical team – and national

park staff shot first Peter and then Carpenter.

Expert thinking was that the remaining females would rejoin the main troop – but the thinking was flawed. Why would a high ranking female, with a suckling juvenile take her family unit into a situation where undoubtedly they would be beaten up by the other baboons, and possibly their offspring killed?

Big Mamma did not rejoin the main troop, but kept her family together – covering areas they had traversed with Peter, Carpenter and Sebastian. So Big Mamma was trapped, collared and tagged – now the technical team could manage and push her to the main troop.

But this still did not work and this is where, it seems, logical thought appears to have ended. For reasons that defy understanding the team decided to capture Crookie and remove her from the troop. Crookie is a low ranking female with a badly deformed right hand. She, like both Big Mamma and Lady Godiva, has a suckling juvenile of between four and six months.

Crookie was trapped and incarcerated at the Westlake cage for a weekend. Oddy, the BTT did not know Crookie had a baby; "there was no tone with her" when they trapped her.

So Crookie was separated from her baby for crimes unknown. In response to public outcry Crookie was released.

Of all the many upsetting, distressing things I have had to bear witness to in my time with baboons, I think that this incident is the saddest; this stressed family unit during the cover of bushes as four men with large paintball guns converged on them. To be fair, no shots were fired while I was present. Perhaps the guns are just for show? But somehow I doubt this, the girls were too nervous, too edgy; in similar circumstances I would have expected the troop to be foraging, resting – yet they appeared to be anxious and did

## OPINION

nots top to rest.

Renowned wildlife artist Noel Ashton has an incredible exhibition currently on display in The Cape Gallery, Cape Town. One of his paintings depicts a young baboon – in the eyes of the baboon Noel has captured all the understanding, sadness and wisdom accumulated from years of persecution, a collective memory of the species. And it is that collective memory that saddens me more than the critical wounds of the physical body. A well planned, effectively carried out action that resulted in the deaths of two males, the destruction of a family unit – all for the supposed "good of baboons".

I cannot accept the scenario whereby planned actions become aggressive and result in cruelty. There can be no greater good if it is gained off the back of suffering.

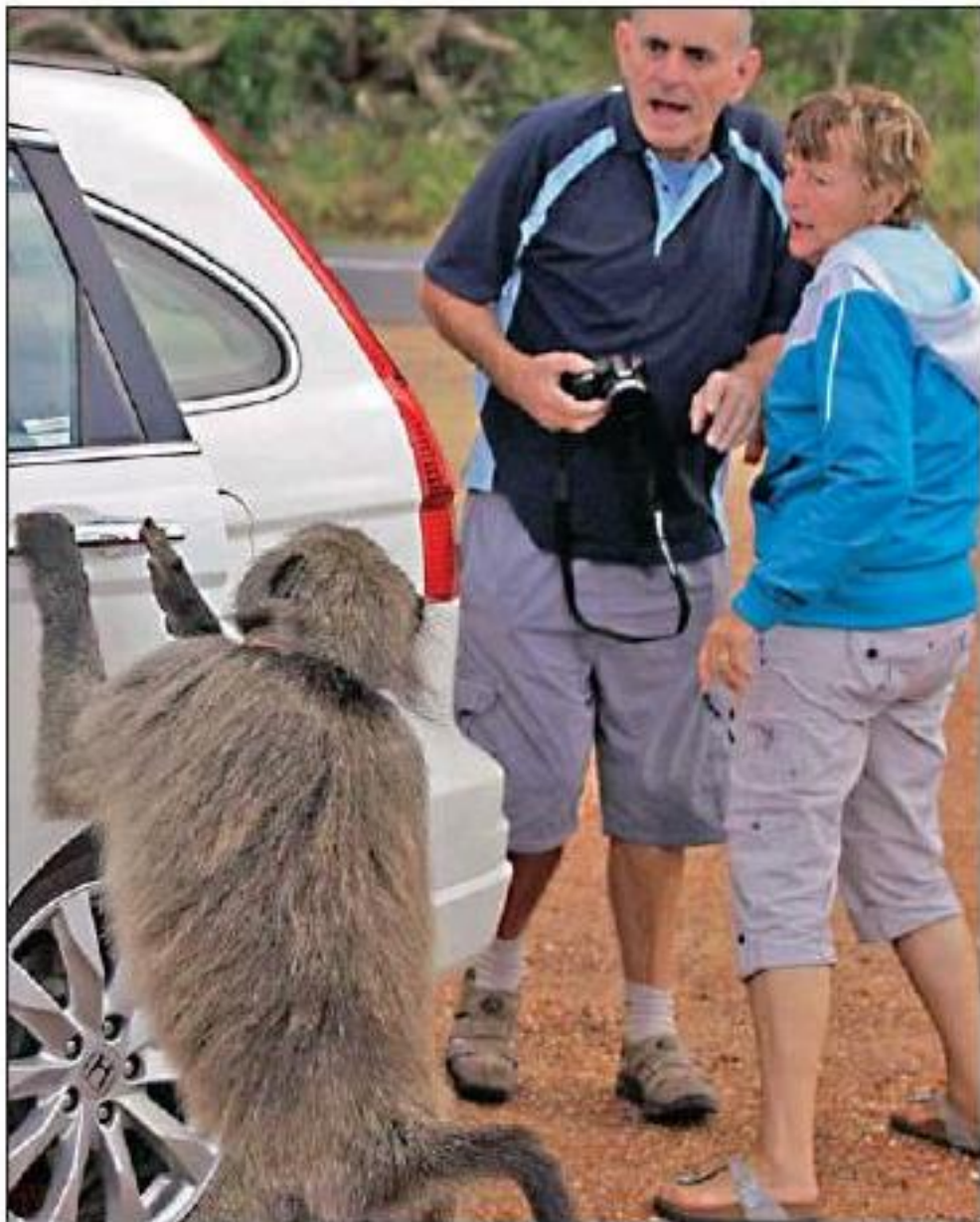
I suspect the members of the Baboon Technical Team are aware that their directives are debatable, as this would explain the shroud of secrecy that covers every action; if they were proud of their orders and activity I am sure they would make these directives public knowledge; the fact that they have not is, perhaps, indicative of their own unease.

The recent actions of the team show a remarkable lack of ethical consideration as well as a dearth of logical understanding of baboons, and suffering of Crookie and the whole Big Mamma family.

As residents of Cape Town, living on the edges of one of the foremost national parks in the world – can we sanction these random acts of aggression and pass them off as acceptable management? Or do we demand that our conservation authorities engage ethical considerations in planning? I urge residents to make their voice heard; silence will be taken as approval.

● *Baboon conservationist Jenni Thowan is the founder of Baboon Matters*

## Snack attack



**APE EXPECTATIONS:** These baboons decide to introduce themselves to their human spectators near Cape Point. Hendrik Raven, left, reacts as a baboon opens his car door while, right, a baboon with a baby raids a car for food. Baboon monitors spend their days following troops across the Peninsula to ensure they don't misbehave.

PICTURES: AP/SCHALK WILZBURG

EXPECTATIONS: These baboons decide to introduce themselves to their human spectators near Cape Point. Hendrik Raven, left, reacts as a baboon with a baby raids a car for food. Baboon monitors spend their days following troops across the Peninsula to ensure they don't misbehave.

## Baboons are the victims, not tourists

THE CAPTION on the front-page photographs of human/baboon interaction (Cape Argus, October 28) makes a misleading statement: "These baboons decided to introduce themselves to their human spectators near Cape Point."

It is the other way around. What the photos show is how baboons have become accustomed to people because of the irresponsible conduct of visitors who "introduce themselves" to baboons.

Baboons are wild animals. It is illegal to feed them and they should not be posed with or photographed at close

physical range. However, visitors and tourists routinely alight from cars and buses to do so, despite verbal warnings, educational leaflets and signs in the vicinity of Cape Point. Sadly, there is even photographic evidence of tactile contact.

Such proactive human "introductions" have naturally resulted in "expectations" of humans providing fast food. These expectations are so high that many baboons have become skilled at opening vehicle doors to obtain food, rather than spend many hours foraging in the fynbos.

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tively states: "Baboon monitors spend their days following troops across the Peninsula to ensure they don't misbehave." The baboon monitoring programme is directed at troop movements to keep troops out of urban areas, and not at baboon behaviour.

Monitors are often criticised for being inactive, but if the baboons are within their home range, they cannot be herded away, even if people are "introducing" themselves.

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Baboon Liaison Group  
Constantia

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