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Cape Baboon Partnership's Applied Conservation Scientist Dr Joselyn Mormile replies to a Daily Maverick opinion piece by Dr Adam Cruise entitled *The arrogance of scientific certainty — Cape Town's baboons deserve ethics, not imprisonment*. Cruise wrote his piece in response to an opinion piece by Professor Justin O'Riain entitled *Baboons have revealed their hand, and that's why a sanctuary is the best option*.

Freedom at what cost? – a reply to Cruise

In arguing that Cape Town's baboons deserve freedom rather than captivity, Cruise raises important ethical questions. But his argument overlooks an equally important consideration: what happens when the freedom he defends in baboons is inseparable from chronic suffering, injury, poor health and premature death?

In his recent article, Cruise challenges support for the proposed Urban Wildlife Centre for Cape Town's Waterfall and Seaforth baboon troops. He argues that scientific expertise does not confer moral authority, that the decision to confine them cannot be justified by ecological evidence alone, that alternatives exist, and that wild animals have an inherent interest in freedom.

Firstly, we agree that science and ethics are not interchangeable. Understanding an animal's behaviour does not automatically determine how we ought to treat it. Cruise however fails to acknowledge that ethical principles cannot be applied meaningfully without understanding the biological, ecological and welfare realities of the animals concerned.

Secondly, Cruise claims there was no meaningful engagement with animal ethics or the implications of permanently restricting sentient animals' autonomy. This is incorrect. A formal ethical assessment was included in the Action Plan, and stakeholder concerns about ethics and welfare were addressed in the response to comments on the draft plan. While disagreement with the assessment is entirely legitimate, it is incorrect to claim that no such assessment was undertaken.

At the heart of Cruise's position is the assumption that freedom is inherently preferable to captivity.
For wild animals living in functioning natural environments, there are compelling reasons to defend this principle. Freedom enables animals to move, forage, explore, reproduce and interact with their environment in ways shaped by their evolutionary history.

But what about when the environment in which an animal exercises that freedom has been fundamentally transformed by humans? What happens when the choices available to that animal repeatedly expose it to injury, disease, persecution and premature death? And what happens when decades of management have failed to meaningfully change those outcomes?

These are not hypothetical questions for Cape Town's baboons. Their lives are increasingly shaped by urban environments in which access to food comes with substantial risks. Vehicle collisions, electrocutions, dog attacks, gunshot injuries and other human-related harms are well-documented consequences of baboons entering residential areas.

The Waterfall and Seaforth baboons are not moving freely through an undisturbed natural landscape. They are navigating an environment dominated by roads, buildings, fences, vehicles, dogs, field rangers, and people, many of whom do not welcome their presence. Their ability to exercise natural behaviours is already profoundly compromised.

There is no question that freedom has value. The question is whether the particular form of freedom available to these baboons outweighs the suffering associated with it. Cruise does not confront this reality.

Further, Cruise highlights the potential negative welfare consequences of confinement, including reduced freedom of movement, reduced environmental choice and limitations on some natural behaviours. These concerns are legitimate and must inform the design and management of the Urban Wildlife Centre.

However, they should not be considered in isolation from the serious welfare harms associated with the animals' current circumstances. Comparing a sanctuary with an idealised existence in the wild is neither scientifically meaningful nor ethically sufficient.

Cruise argues that humans created the conditions responsible for human-baboon conflict and that it is therefore unjust for baboons to bear the consequences. We agree that urban development has transformed natural habitats, restricted access to important resources and created highly attractive artificial food sources and that human behaviour, such as deliberate feeding and shooting, continues to harm baboons. Society has a responsibility to address these drivers.

However, many of the consequences of human influence cannot simply be reversed nor can animals already suffering simply wait for human behaviour to change or urban landscapes to be redesigned.

Cruise proposes improved waste management, fencing, enforcement, habitat connectivity and ranger programmes as alternatives to captivity. These are important interventions, and many form part of the broader Cape Peninsula Baboon Strategic Management Plan. A critical point however is that different troops occupy different landscapes, experience different levels of urban habituation and face different management constraints.

For instance, for some troops fencing the urban edge will provide effective separation while retaining access to suitable natural habitat. For others, including Waterfall and Seaforth, the combination of topography, habitat availability and entrenched urban ranging behaviour makes this highly unlikely to succeed. A fence that simply displaces baboons into the next suburb is not a solution.

Cruise then calls for a transparent comparison with the alternative fence proposed by David Gaynor. While authorities have supplied specifications and current costs for an established fence design, comparable specifications and costing for Gaynor's proposal have reportedly not been supplied despite repeated requests over more than a year.

Importantly any fence proposal would require environmental authorisation and consultation with affected residents. Walsh et al. (2023), a study co-authored by Gaynor, suggests that public responses to such fencing may be more negative than positive.

Even assuming that Gaynor’s untested fence proves feasible, an estimated 18–24-month implementation period raises urgent ethical questions: who bears responsibility for the baboon injuries and deaths, and residential property damage while we wait? And what happens if the troops simply move to the next unfenced low-lying urban area?

Another suggested solution was habitat corridors. Meaningful corridors through established suburbs would require major changes to the built environment, raising difficult questions about feasibility, cost and which communities would be affected.

Preventing further encroachment is essential, but it does not remove the immediate obligation to manage conflict in suburbs that already exist. Nor will securing waste alone prevent urban ranging. Mormile (2024) found that baboons entered low-lying urban areas even where human-derived foods comprised less than 5% of their diet.

Gardens and open spaces provide natural and exotic plants, water, shelter from wind and temperature extremes, and other attractants. Baboon-proof bins remain important for reducing access to hazardous materials and human foods, but they are not an urban exclusion measure.

Changing human behaviour is equally necessary but cannot be assumed to happen simply because it is desirable. Illegal shootings illustrate the enforcement gap: despite the countless airgun pellets found in Peninsula baboons, successful prosecutions owing to lack of substantive evidence and unlicensed weapons are exceptionally rare.

Cruise is entitled to question whether all reasonable alternatives have been adequately assessed. But proposing interventions in principle is not the same as demonstrating that they are feasible, effective and capable of delivering better welfare outcomes for these particular animals.

An ethically credible alternative must do more than preserve the concept of freedom. It must offer a realistic prospect of improving the lives of the baboons concerned.

Cruise's central criticism is that scientists should not assume moral authority simply because they possess ecological expertise. But neither should ethical arguments be treated as self-evidently correct because they invoke principles such as freedom, autonomy and natural living.

Cruise asks whether we have the right to impose captivity. Those supporting the Urban Wildlife Centre must answer that question. But those opposing it must also explain what they propose for these baboons, how their preferred interventions would work, how long implementation would take, what welfare outcomes could reasonably be expected in the meantime, and what happens if the alternatives fail.

How many more years of urban conflict, injury and premature death are considered acceptable while pursuing the ideal of free-ranging coexistence? These may be uncomfortable questions and avoiding them does not make an ethical position more compassionate.

The ultimate goal should be to maintain healthy, free-ranging baboon populations in suitable natural habitats while ensuring that individual animals are not condemned to prolonged suffering in pursuit of that ideal.

Freedom is valuable. So are safety, health, social relationships, behavioural opportunities and the capacity to experience a good life. The true ethical challenge is not choosing between freedom and captivity as abstract principles. The challenge is choosing between the real-world consequences produced by different management decisions.

For Cape Town's most severely urban-affected baboons, the most compassionate choice is not the one that preserves their freedom at any cost, but the one that offers them the greatest opportunity to live well. That is, to experience improved welfare across the nutritional, environmental, health and behavioural domains.

These stakes are not abstract. In the week since writing his opinion piece, another baboon in a troop identified for relocation to a fenced area was shot. The bullet lodged in his spine causing paralysing of the hind limbs which he dragged in the dust behind him, before being euthanised. If this baboon had been in a sanctuary, he could have mated, groomed, socialised, eaten good food, drank clean water and slept in a sheltered and safe environment. Yes, he might have been frustrated with how far he could run… but he still could.