

NEWS FROM:



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Key to baboon management is people, says UCT researcher

It may be called "baboon management", but PhD researcher Bentley Kaplan of UCT's Department of Zoology says that people management is the most problematic component of the job. "Baboons are relatively easy to manage," he said. "People are far more difficult."

Kaplan hopes that ultimately his PhD will produce a holistic strategy for managing people, baboons and waste, side by side, to minimise baboon invasions into human areas. His work builds on the findings of five recently completed theses that have quantified the demographics, spatial ecology, parasites, foraging ecology and management options of the Peninsula baboons.

Kaplan's supervisor, Dr Justin O'Riain, said: "It is essential to first understand the ecology and biology of the Peninsula baboons before attempting to provide sustainable management solutions."

Kaplan said the starting point was a behavioural study conducted in Namibia, which examined how feeding shaped leadership in baboon groups. Researchers found that if they provided a small amount of food to the leader, he would lead the troop to wherever he was fed. In other words, the boss could be bribed.

Marrying behavioural research with conservation, Kaplan's first experiments were to use the Namibian method to lead baboon troops away from populated areas near Simon's Town. The month-long experiment was a success.

Feeding baboons, or provisioning, is a controversial practice, and Kaplan is quick to point out that it is a short-term solution only. He explained that the method could be an effective stop-gap when there were management crises such as a lack of funding for the existing labour-intensive baboon monitor programme.

"While monitors are largely successful at preventing troops from entering urban areas, this method is expensive and has a stop-start history with highly variable success rates," says Kaplan. "So I'm trying to find methods that will either

complement the monitors or, where possible, reduce our reliance on them by providing cheaper, more effective alternatives, which will hopefully not impact on baboon behavior as much as monitors do.”

Ultimately, the solution for harmonious cohabitation primarily lies with changing the perceptions and behaviour of the Cape baboons’ human neighbours. Kaplan explained that baboons did not actually like humans very much – it was the food they were after.

“Human food is very appealing to them,” he said. “It’s nutritious, easy to digest, and readily available in bins, kitchens and shops. So the baboons visit town every day because they get great rewards with very few costs. We showed in our provisioning experiment that if you prevent the baboons from accessing these foods, they significantly reduce the total time in the urban area. Waste management is clearly a top priority in solving the baboon conflict puzzle and we are currently exploring how baboons crack baboon-proof bins and what we can do to outsmart them.”

A side effect of baboon raids is vandalism and crop loss in local vineyards – which has resulted in aggressive reactions from disgruntled residents. Baboons have been shot, poisoned and attacked by dogs, despite their habit of avoiding physical conflict wherever possible. Their shows of aggression, explained Kaplan, were usually exactly that and nothing more.

“While we search for innovative solutions to the ongoing human baboon conflict, we urge residents to assist management by not attracting baboons onto their properties, and if they do enter to take immediate action to deter them,” he said. “Baboons should not be living in and among humans as we pose a serious risk to their health and general welfare.”

Kaplan believes that small steps will lead to a more holistic solution. “If we can modify our urban landscapes with wildlife in mind, devise effective bylaws to prevent people from luring animals into town and agree to be good neighbours, but not personal friends of the baboons, then I think we will be on the right track,” he said. “I know that people want a single 100 percent solution, but with an animal as adaptable and agile as a baboon that’s unlikely to be achieved.”

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