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Single solution for baboons

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March 4, 2020

A single, focussed, unified and driven approach to the Overberg's baboon problem is what is needed, according to Kari Brice, Overstrand DA Councillor for Ward 3.

Kari was speaking at a municipality-convened meeting at Fernkloof Nature Reserve last week to share information about its current baboon control programme, which was recently resuscitated in a new form after a lapse of five years, and to discuss the way forward. She was appointed to a Council-Appointed Group (CAG) on baboons to coordinate groups of concerned community members with the municipality.

"We are looking for the names of relevant people who could sit on an advisory board with regard to the baboon problem," she said. "This will be a special, focussed group of people who have the Hermanus's interests here at heart and

for whom this area is of the utmost importance. They must represent the community but also the cause (baboons).”

This proposed municipal advisory group will hold quarterly meetings, or more often if necessary, and its members will identify workable projects.

Overstrand’s Environmental Manager, Tarron Dry, agreed, saying: “To find a solution that works for us all, baboons included, we need to all speak with one voice: this includes the Municipality, community groups and Human Wildlife Solutions (HWS).”

Currently, there are at least seven neighbourhood WhatsApp groups between the Hermanus suburbs of Voëlklip and Eastcliff and some of these groups are specifically focused on baboons and providing alerts to residents. There are also specific sub-groups for the Special Ratings Area and the Hermanus Ratepayers’ Association (HRA).

In 2019, the Hermanus Baboon Hotline was established as a platform for residents to report specific incidents. Information received this way is used to populate a database of the troop’s movements.

Also, in the last year, a public-private partnership with the Overstrand Municipality was formed called the Hermanus Baboon Action Group (HBAG) to educate people about dealing with baboons in urban areas (ensuring the correct use of baboon-proof refuse bins, not planting fruit trees, not feeding baboons, not physically harming baboons, etc.) by using social media platforms, a website, as well as a leaflet.

Pat Redford, spokesperson for HBAG, said how frustrating it was to try to educate residents about not leaving their rubbish accessible to baboons. “We really need the help of law enforcement,” she implored the municipality. “We can’t do it ourselves.”

Frequenting the Voëlklip-to-Eastcliff area and making sometimes daily raids in suburbia, are two baboon troops – the so-called Fernkloof troop (30 members strong), and the more easterly-roaming Vogelgat troop (14). In the greater Hermanus area, there is the large Hamilton Russell troop from the Hemel-en-Aarde Valley (60 members) and another troop of unknown size above Onrus.

While the municipality has limited funds and physical resources to police transgressions, Dry said that in Cape Town, residents had started publicly shaming their neighbours on social media, not by name, but by street, and that this had a major impact and led to improved behaviour.

Dry said social media groups tend to develop into social and sensationalised 'chat' groups. "They should rather stick to the facts and function as Early Warning Systems (EWSs) to alert fellow neighbours to a troop's movement and a potential home or garden invasion," he said.

What was clear from the meeting was that the various groups or organisations involved do not all have the same agenda and this is complicating attempts to form a strong and unified position from which to work and educate people, in the interests of the safety of the baboons, as well as their human neighbours and their property.

The meeting also included an eye-opening presentation by Esmé Beamish from the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Cape Town (UCT) of her PhD thesis, entitled *Threatened to Thriving: Conservation of Cape Peninsula Baboons 2006-2019*. Her studies show how the management of the Cape Peninsula troops was underpinned by a considerable amount of research (three PhD theses and four Masters), all of which point strongly to the hypothesis that humans and wild animals cannot live together and should remain in their separate habitats, with as little interaction as possible.

“The consequences of such a spatial overlap is conflict and may lead to human-induced injury of baboons, such as shooting, poisoning or being injured by a speeding car, or even the injury of a human or a pet,” said Esmé.

Her research shows how capturing and tagging two dominant adults in a troop (one male, one female) has been effective in tracking and managing the baboons by using the Virtual Fence, which is still to be fully implemented in Hermanus. In the meantime, rangers with paintball guns have managed to keep the troop together for longer periods than has been the norm in the past five years.

The virtual fence is made up of a sophisticated radio transmitter system that relays the movements of a troop to a cellular phone. If a troop moves too close to a residential area an alert is sent out and baboon monitors deploy sound boxes that emit the sounds of predators roaring, animals dying and other frightening sound effects, including bear bangers that make a loud banging noise. The baboons are tracked via collars attached to the troop leaders.

Two dominant adults from the Fernkloof troop have been collared and tagged in a joint project between the Overstrand Municipality and HWS as the first step to managing them with the Virtual Fence. However, none of the Vogelgat troop members are collared and thus they are not being monitored or managed and make almost daily incursions into Voëlklip.

A presentation at the meeting by HWS’s Dr Phil Richardson dramatically showed how the Fernkloof baboons have been reacting to the presence of the monitors and have been less frequent visitors to town.

Phil said the cost of an electronic collar, the veterinary costs for darting a baboon and then fitting the collar onto it is about R15 000 per baboon. Attendees at the meeting agreed it would be a great idea to find sufficient funding to collar two alpha adults each in the Vogelgat and Hemel-en-Aarde troops as a matter of urgency. It was pointed out, however, that the

municipality has limited resources to manage, effectively, more than one troop at this point.