

Of the five species of non-human primates in South Africa, baboons are the most adaptable to diverse environments. These diurnal, highly social animals are widely distributed throughout sub-Saharan Africa. They can exploit riverine forest and savannah and can also adapt to cultivated land. This remarkable ability to adapt has caused the animals to come into conflict with humans, particularly as much of the natural habitat is being eroded. Understanding this remarkable flexibility - which in many respects is similar to our own - is one of the most important reasons to preserve and study baboons.

The study of baboons can provide important insights into human evolution and behavior. Like us, baboons are highly intelligent, extremely social animals. Baboons are capable of both friendship and strategic interactions. They maintain long-term relationships with other individuals, both kin and non-kin. With long-lived species such as baboons, long-term studies are the only way to determine the depth and complexity of behavior. Insights into the behavior of baboons have resulted from studies conducted over the past forty years that in some instances span decades. In South Africa baboons have been studied by both South African and international researchers in Blyde, Loskop, Free State, Drakensberg and Cape Town.

Our relationship with baboons is a long one. Fossil evidence suggests that humans and baboons have lived in close proximity for millions of years. Fossils of early baboons are index species for early fossil humans, indicating where to look for early human ancestors. This close evolutionary relationship exists because humans and baboons have long exploited the same environments. This long-standing interaction is currently the subject of research in both the Free State and the Cape Peninsula and may lead to a further understanding of the “affiliative” nature of the interaction between these two species. It is quite possible that early in the history of the two species, living in proximity may have had advantages for both species causing them to co-evolve. Genetic studies of baboons are currently under way, and will provide insight into the relationships among the baboons of southern Africa, including information on how they evolved and diverged over the past two million years. This information will in turn be used to understand population movements and divergence within our own lineage.

In addition to the fundamental role baboons play in helping us understand human behavior and evolution, there are many other important reasons to conserve baboons. For example, conserving baboons will help conserve indigenous plant communities. We know that baboons play a crucial part in ecosystem maintenance. Recent studies in South Africa have shown that baboons are important seed dispersers. One of the reasons why baboons have become “problem animals” in some areas is precisely because of human disruption of natural ecosystems. The effects of such ecosystem disruption are only beginning to be understood in South Africa, with the emerging understanding of the importance of native flora and fauna.

The ability of baboons to adapt to diverse environments and the need to feed in areas where once indigenous plants dominated has led to conflict with humans. One example of this conflict has been brought on by the recent introduction of non-native forests, which have supplanted native plant communities on which the baboons rely. Ironically,

baboons, which are an indigenous species, are being threatened in an attempt to protect such non-native cash crops.

Such primate-human tension is not unique to South Africa. Researchers around the world are currently engaged in studying the human-non-human primate interface. In fact, this area of research has become increasingly important. In Japan, scholars study macaques; in India, langurs; in Brazil, spider monkeys in Madagascar, lemurs; and in Africa, baboons and guenons. People around the world are actively engaged in determining the best ways to conserve the animals while at the same time allowing human activities to proceed with minimal disruption. Before making any recommendations about the disposition of the animals it is vital to assess what has been done elsewhere and to attempt to implement best practices in South Africa.

In situations where baboons come into conflict with local populations of people, our recommendations are to continue to study the baboon-human interaction in order to identify the underlying causes for the conflict, and provide a legal and ethical solution which is acceptable to all parties. This can take a multi-pronged approach.

- Baboons should be followed and studied intensely for a least one year in order to determine the nature and extent of their use of non-native forest materials.
- All baboon troops in the cultivated areas should be identified and counted.
- If any troop is found to be damaging trees, the degree of damage should be scientifically assessed using internationally recognized standards
- A team of experts including behaviorists, ecologists and entomologists should be engaged in this study
- Best practices techniques from other countries should be assessed and tested.
- Internationally accepted silviculture options must be explored to reduce tree damage.
- Forest managers must be exposed to primate ecology theories and priorities.
- An internationally recognized, ethical policy should be adopted by the parent company that coordinates and integrates all research findings.

To act otherwise would be irresponsible and would contravene international agreements such as CITES, of which South Africa is a signatory. We also recommend during this time of research and data gathering a moratorium be placed on all baboon killing.

We at PEGG are dedicated to the study and conservation of primates and would welcome the opportunity to help in the study of these important animals. We can provide experts who can run seminars, give talks and otherwise work to educate local forest managers and communities on primatology. We can aid in recruiting experts to help in doing the research. Please feel free to contact us.

Respectfully,

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