Animal welfare considerations in primate rehabilitation: an assessment of three vervet monkey (Chlorocebus aethiops) releases in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Abstract

This study evaluates the methods utilised to release and monitor three troops of rehabilitated vervet monkeys (Chlorocebus aethiops) in South Africa. In all cases, monitoring was poor and conducted over a short time-frame disallowing release outcomes to be fully assessed. Wild troops were present at two of the three locations, casting doubt upon sightings of released monkeys and indicating that the release sites chosen were unsuitable and presented disease risks to the wild vervets. Eighty-three percent of monkeys were unaccounted for at the end of monitoring. Any future releases should make use of radio or GPS collars to track the monkeys, have a planned monitoring schedule covering a period of at least one year, collect detailed data on behaviour, demographics and ecology and should follow the IUCN Guidelines for Non-Human Primate Re-introductions.

Keywords: animal welfare, Chlorocebus aethiops, primate, rehabilitation, release, South Africa

Introduction

Injured and orphaned primates often result from conflict with humans (Henzi 1979; Brennan et al 1985; Saj et al 2001), particularly in urban areas where extensive development has forced them into close proximity. Hundreds of injured and/or orphaned vervet monkeys (Chlorocebus aethiops) come into care each year throughout South Africa and this has instigated the development of at least 20 centres that rehabilitate primates (Wimberger et al 2010a). Such centres strive to return displaced primates to the wild, with the aim of improving their welfare. Previous studies of vervet monkey rehabilitation and release (Wimberger et al 2010b; Guy et al 2011, 2012) suggest that survival is low and post-release monitoring of these individuals is difficult. The current study has provided the opportunity to add a further three releases to the assessment of vervet monkey rehabilitation, with particular focus on methods of release and post-release monitoring and animal welfare concerns.

Materials and methods

Data for this study were collected by the Centre for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife (CROW) in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa. The data were collated by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife (EKZNW) and subsequently analysed by the present authors. EKZNW did not play a role in the work (either the release itself or our assessment of it). They provided data to us for the purpose of obtaining an independent, objective assessment so as to provide a scientific basis upon which to consider policies and practices. For this reason, so as not to compromise independence, EKZNW has not been involved in any way in the preparation of this paper.

Due to the limited nature of the data provided, details of housing and diet cannot be presented here. CROW is a registered rehabilitation centre and has permits to conduct rehabilitation and release issued by EKZNW. Rehabilitation and release in KZN follow the Norms and Standards for the Management of Primates in KwaZulu-Natal (Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife 2008).

Study animals

The study animals comprise three troops of vervet monkeys housed at CROW. The first troop, referred to herein as ‘Ven Afrika 1’, consisted of 39 animals including 31 adults and juveniles and eight infants. The second troop, ‘Ven Afrika 2’, consisted of 18 animals (16 adults, two infants). CROW did not provide details of gender proportions. The third troop, ‘Bonamanzi’ consisted of 19 animals, the ages of which were not supplied by CROW. EKZNW did not play a role in the work (either the release itself or our assessment of it). They provided data to us for the purpose of obtaining an independent, objective assess-