Pets and pests: vervet monkey intake at a specialist South African rehabilitation centre

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Abstract

Vervet monkeys (Chlorocebus pygerythrus) encounter a plethora of anthropogenic risks as a result of their ability to exploit human-altered environments. A systematic assessment of these risks has not been carried out to date. Here, we aim to begin addressing this gap in our understanding of human-vervet conflict in South Africa. We present a descriptive analysis of the intake of the Vervet Monkey Foundation (VMF) — a specialist vervet monkey rehabilitation centre and sanctuary in the Limpopo Province. Between October 2003 and March 2012 almost 200 vervet monkeys arrived at the VMF. At least 161 infants arrived with a steady decrease in annual intake over time, most probably due to the increasing number of other centres in the province. Detailed data for all age classes were available from March 2009 to March 2012. Of the 50 monkeys that arrived during this period, more young monkeys (infants and juveniles) than adults arrived and more infants than juveniles. Intake of injured and uninjured monkeys was equal. The majority of injuries were caused by cars and the majority of uninjured arrivals were ex-pets handed over voluntarily. A distinct temporal pattern of arrival, peaking in the austral summer, coincides with the birthing season of vervet monkeys in South Africa. The merits of publishing such records and the welfare implications of the perceptions of and objections to these ‘pest’ primates are discussed.

Keywords: animal welfare, Chlorocebus/Cercopithecus, human-wildlife conflict, pest primates, primate rehabilitation, vervet monkey

Introduction

There have been a number of studies of the rehabilitation and sanctuary of several primate taxa including pygmy slow lorises (Nycticebus pygmaeus) (Streicher 2004), Guianan brown capuchins (Cebus paella) (Suarez et al 2001), black howler monkeys (Alouatta pigra) (Horwich et al 1993), vervet monkeys (Chlorocebus pygerythrus) (Rhind & Lawes 1998; Grobler et al 2006; Winberger et al 2010; Guy et al 2011, 2012), yellow baboons (Papio cynocephalus) (Gruesen 2007), various gibbon species (Hylobates spp) (Cheyne et al 2012), including Müller’s Bornean gibbon (Hylobates muelleri) (Bennett 1992) and the silvery Javan gibbon (Hylobates moloch) (Ware 2001), gorillas (Gorilla spp) (Farmer & Courage 2008; King et al in press), and chimpanzees (Pan troglodytes) (Humle et al 2010; Ongman et al 2013). These studies have covered topics including the evaluation of release and reintroduction success and methods, survivorship, and post-release monitoring protocol (Horwich et al 1993; Rhind & Lawes 1998; Suarez et al 2001; Streicher 2004; Gruesen 2007; Humle et al 2010; Winberger et al 2010; Guy et al 2013; King et al in press); welfare implications of release (Guy et al 2011, 2012); rehabilitation methods (Cheyne et al 2012; Guy et al 2013; Ongman et al 2013); and the role of rehabilitation and reintroduction as a conservation tool (Bennett 1992; Ware 2001; Farmer & Courage 2008).

Studies of admittance data from sanctuary and rehabilitation centre populations have been less common despite growing anthropogenic pressures and the increase in rehabilitation and sanctuary programmes in welfare and conservation strategies. What studies there have been have focused on rare and endangered taxa such as the African great apes (Farmer 2002; Gheobrial et al 2010; Faust et al 2011; Hughes et al 2011). Vervet monkeys are a more common species admitted to such centres yet the history and composition of these rescue/rehabilitation centre populations have not been studied to date. Studies of the release of rehabilitated vervet monkeys have discussed some individual histories in the context of suitability for release (Rhind & Lawes 1998; Winberger et al 2010; Guy et al 2011, 2012). However, as the cause of admittance of the study populations was not the focus of these studies, the composition of these rehabilitation centre populations was not described and the anthropogenic threats faced by this conflict species remain unreported in the academic literature.

Vervet monkeys are ecologically flexible primates that range throughout eastern and southern Africa (Whittaker 2013). They can exploit various habitats from dry savannah to gallery forest, thrive in disturbed growth habitat, and exploit human-altered environments such as tourist parks, agricultural land and urban residential areas (Whittaker 2013).