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Beyond baboon 'huggers' and 'haters'

PICTURE a Simon's Town resident watching a baboon in her kitchen. Her heart pounds as she experiences fear, anger, and frustration. But also, something else: concern and empathy.

"Part of me wants them gone," she reflects. "But I also feel sorry for them. We're in their space."

She's not confused or indecisive. She's holding a nuanced view about a complex issue, something that rarely seems acceptable in Cape Town's polarised baboon debate – and she's not alone. She represents the majority of residents on the Cape Peninsula: the silent majority drowned out by the noise of 'hugger versus hater' shouting competitions.

Stuck between extremes

Cape Town's baboon governance is often paralysed, not because management tools don't exist, but because every suggestion triggers a war of words.

What happens to the baboons caught in this crossfire? When management stalls, baboons habituate further to urban spaces, putting them at greater risk. Conflict escalates while decision-makers freeze, and mistrust grows. Sometimes this tragic cycle ends in euthanasia.

Meanwhile, residents who don't conform to polarised rhetoric stay silent, feeling unheard, frustrated, powerless, sometimes even ostracised from their own communities.

This isn't just narrative failure. It reflects how difficult it is to engage with complexity in the face of an inherently complex conservation challenge.

Cape Town isn't alone in this struggle. Across the world, cities are learning that coexistence with wildlife is not just an ecological or technical challenge – it is a social one too. Urban wildlife worldwide, such as black bears in Canada, deer in Sweden, or boars in Hong Kong, are testing governance systems rarely designed for dynamic, messy coexistence. So, how do we respond to their challenge?

Missing Middle

In 2023, our research team sur-



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veyed over 500 residents across 11 baboon-visited areas on the Cape Peninsula. What we found challenges the media narrative.

Yes, some residents prioritise safety and prefer separation. Yes, others embrace coexistence and oppose management approaches they see as harmful to baboons. But very few want baboons killed, and very few want baboons eating from their plates.

The striking finding? Most respondents don't fit the polarised extremes. Nearly half fall somewhere in between, holding views that resist simple categorisation.

If they're the biggest group, why are they silent? From our interactions with residents (though this wasn't studied systematically), the current discourse won't accommodate their complexity.

Almost every public forum, be it WhatsApp groups or town hall meetings, forces people into camps. Express concern about safety and you're labelled a 'hater'. Show empathy for baboons and you're a naive 'hugger'. The middle ground gets squeezed out.

But their silence doesn't necessarily

mean confusion or inaction. Compared to other residents we surveyed, this group more often selected both positive and negative emotions when describing encounters, revealing internal tensions between multiple perspectives.

Yes, they worry about safety for both people and baboons. Yes, they believe baboons deserve respect. Yes, they're frustrated when baboons turn their kitchen upside down. And crucially, they recognise that people and baboons are here now, and neither are going anywhere. This represents a pragmatic starting point that sometimes gets lost in polarised debates.

Embracing complementary roles

On World Wildlife Day (March 3), I invite you to look beyond your own perspective and listen to other views, not to respond, but to understand.

Don't get me wrong: this isn't about eliminating advocacy or accountability. We need that.

But what if seemingly incompatible perspectives could sometimes play complementary roles in urban wildlife governance?

What if those primarily concerned about safety served as vigilant early-warning systems, helping identify genuine risks before they escalate? What if those driven by empathy toward baboons continued challenging assumptions and pushing for innovative approaches?

And what if those in the middle could serve as an anchor for dialogue, creating spaces where people practise listening across differences without being forced into extremes?

If wildlife governance systems recognised these complementary roles more explicitly, could that improve outcomes? We cannot be certain, but it may help shift the conversation from opposition toward shared responsibility.

Voices, emotions, relationships

Wildlife governance systems could embrace complexity rather than avoid it. How?

First, create spaces where middle voices can be heard through deliber-

ative forums and citizen assemblies where nuance is valued, not penalised.

Second, recognise that emotions provide meaningful information. Wildlife governance is inherently emotional because it touches deeply held values. Both 'sides' often make emotional arguments, just expressing different emotions. Governance could recognise that emotions reveal what truly matters to people – information that can help decision-makers navigate contestations more effectively.

Third, mobilise existing capacities and nurture new ones. This means building governance systems that prioritise relationships, practise inclusivity, maintain transparency, and remain accountable.

None of this removes the need for difficult decisions. Trade-offs will remain. But decisions made within inclusive, transparent systems are more likely to be seen as legitimate, even when not everyone agrees.

Opportunity

Cape Town's baboon management is unique globally. Yes, controversy exists, but so do often-overlooked achievements.

The urban baboon management programme provides conservation attention to species that rarely receives formal funding and keeps them out of dangerous urban situations. It also provides employment for local staff. And by encouraging baboons to spend more time in natural areas, it enhances their ecological role and conservation value.

If we embrace our diverse roles and capacities and recognise that complexity does not have to mean conflict, Cape Town has an opportunity to model new approaches to urban wildlife governance.

The question is whether we are willing to make space for that complexity in our public conversations and institutions.

This World Wildlife Day, let's think differently and embrace the collective responsibility for better outcomes for both people and wildlife.