

Stockholm
Resilience Centre



BABOON ATTITUDES ON THE CAPE PENINSULA

A report from the
Unruly Natures project

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ABOUT THIS STUDY

In May 2023, a small team of two researchers, a research assistant and four fieldworkers started knocking on doors in Capri and Ocean View. This was the start of a something that had been in preparation for months: a survey about people's experiences of and attitudes towards urban baboons on the Cape Peninsula.

The survey was part of a research project funded by a Formas, a Swedish research council for sustainable development, through Stockholm University. The project, called *Unruly Natures: Awareness, attitudes, and action in environmental stewardship for a better relationship between two urban primates* started late 2022 and runs to mid-2025. It is led by Johan Enqvist, who lives in Cape Town since 2018 and has been researching how people in cities relate to nature for well over a decade. This work is driven especially by a fascination by how people deal with unexpected circumstances following changes in the interplay between the natural environment and the world humans try to create for themselves.

WHAT IS UNRULY NATURE?

Unruly Natures might sound like passing a judgement about nature, but the project name refers more to people's experience of what they can't control – things that can't be *ruled*. The project is not research about

baboons, nor is it about wildlife conservation per se. Rather, it is trying to understand how people experience living next to a wild, at times hard-to-control species that can be perceived both as threatening and destructive, and as peaceful and charming.

How should we, as humans, act towards a nature that doesn't always behave the way we want it to?



This is a relevant research topic in many parts of the world, as human settlements and activities continue to expand. While the environmental impact is often negative, some wildlife finds ways to survive or even thrive in cities' predator-scarce, food-rich and artificially heated landscapes. Examples include [otters](#) in Singapore, [badgers](#) across towns in the United Kingdom, [humpback whales](#) in the New York harbour, and [leopards](#) in Mumbai. This can lead to both positive and negative

interactions between people and wildlife. Public opinion and understanding are often divided regarding the best way to respond to the presence of wildlife in cities. The urban setting, therefore, poses new challenges to landscape management, wildlife conservation, and environmental stewardship, and understanding people's views often lie at the heart of them.



WHY CHOOSE CAPE TOWN?

Cape Town and the Cape chacma baboon present a unique case study, with a range of challenges because of the varied geography, baboon troop dynamics, and socioeconomic conditions, as well as decades of debate around the topic. Importantly, *Unruly Natures* does not attempt to resolve all issues surrounding human-baboon interactions, but it aims to provide better knowledge about residents' own lived experiences of and attitudes towards baboons. We believe that whatever the residents, authorities and other stakeholders want to do about the baboons, it helps to know how the general public in concerned areas actually think. During the research process, we hope to engage with interested stakeholders and share findings in a way that can contribute to a mutual

understanding of different viewpoints on a complex issue, and point to areas of potential collaboration.

Experiences and opinions may be subjective, but they still shape people's actions

Drawing attention to personal opinions about baboons might seem counter-productive in a context where the public debate is already polarised. However, the purpose is neither to amplify differences, nor to attempt to erase them. Rather, we hope to show how different views, extreme or mainstream, can make sense based on the specific lived experience of those who express it. It seems unlikely that everyone will rally around a consensus viewpoint, but agreeing to disagree can be just as important for being able to move forward. And who knows - maybe an important step towards finding ways to live alongside baboons, lies in finding ways to live alongside people with different views about those baboons.

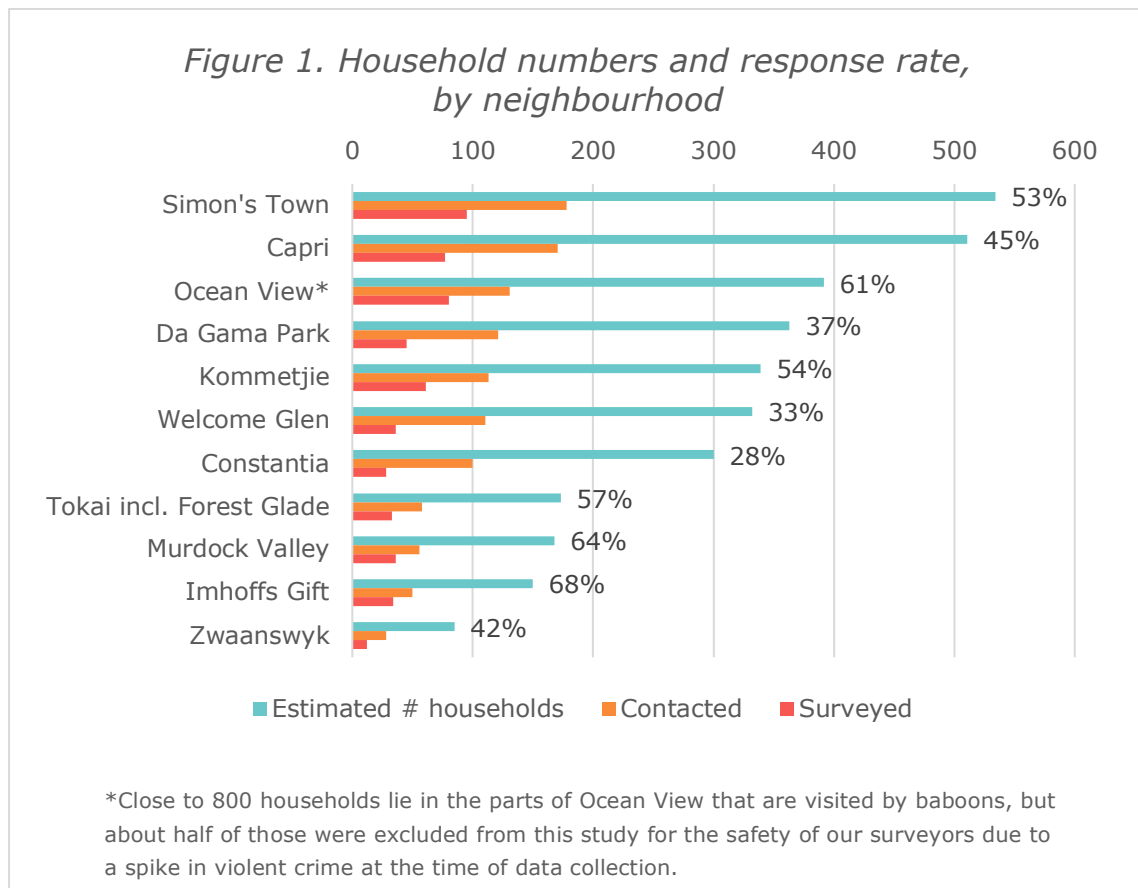
HOW THE SURVEY WAS DONE

The survey was carried out as part of an academic research project, and included several steps to ensure quality and rigour. This report will not go into details about this, since it will be presented and scrutinised in future articles published in peer-reviewed scientific journals. However, some things are worth mentioning here for the sake of clarity and to minimise confusion and misunderstandings about what the findings mean.

WHO IS REPRESENTED IN THESE FINDINGS

Our aim was to capture data that speaks for all residents that live in an area on the Cape Peninsula that is regularly visited by baboons. This “study area” was identified based where baboons had been most active from late 2022 to early 2023, according to the Urban Baboon Programme. In each area, we went door-to-door and invited every 3rd household to take the survey. By selecting homes at regular intervals, instead of, for instance, asking people on the street or at a mall, we get closer to a cross-section of the population. For all households where no one answered, we left a notice that we had visited, and tried again on a different weekday at a different time of day.

We estimated that over 3,300 households lie within our study area, from Constantia in the north to Murdock Valley in the south and Kommetjie in the west. We contacted 1/3 of these, and with 537 survey participants we got an overall response rate of 48%. This number was higher in areas where residents were easier to reach and willing to participate, such as Imhoff’s Gift (68%), Murdock Valley (64%) and Ocean View (61%), and lower in areas where this was harder, such as Constantia (28%), Welcome Glen (33%) and Da Gama Park (37%) (Figure 1).



Overall, we are very satisfied with the high response rate, and we are confident that paired with our systematic selection of households, it means that our findings are statistically representative of the residents on the Cape Peninsula. The only exceptions are children under the age of 18, residents living in areas that were inaccessible due to security concerns (such as private estates that would not allow access, or areas

where crime posed a risk to our surveyors), and recruits and others residing in restricted access South African Navy facilities in Simon's Town. We also can't speak for non-residents in the area, such as shop owners, temporary visitors, and people who work in the study areas but do not live there.



CONDUCTING RESEARCH ETHICALLY

Researchers have a responsibility not only to produce reliable knowledge, but also to treat participants and concerned communities respectfully and ethically. *Unruly Natures* takes several steps to ensure this, three of which are particularly important. First, we protect the identity of everyone who took part in the survey or is interviewed. This is to encourage participants to share their honest opinion, without risk of repercussion. The survey was answered on electronic tablets or on paper, filled in by the respondents themselves. The research project is conducted according to the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and has been approved in ethical assessments by Swedish authorities as well as locally by University of Cape Town.



Second, for the survey design we use a tool called SenseMaker, that has been developed to invite participants to help analyse or “make sense” of the answers collected. It does this by first asking one or two open-ended questions about a topic that can be answered freely, followed by several multiple-choice questions that guide respondents in telling the researchers about the meaning of the perspective they have shared. We have used this method previously and found it particularly helpful when studying complex issues where people’s understanding of what is going on might differ, and where it is important that the researchers don’t make assumptions about what respondents are talking about.

Third, our project has set up an Advisory Board consisting of nine residents from different neighbourhoods in our study area. We intentionally recruited members who also represents different perspectives on the issue, but that agreed to set aside their personal views to help us carry out the project. This board has been invaluable in helping us ensure that our research stays locally relevant and minimises potential negative impacts on a sensitive issue. More information about the board can be found on our website: <https://unrulynatures.com/the-project-team/>

EMERGING FINDINGS

The numbers and findings presented here are a first step in analysing the survey results. In the survey, respondents were first asked to answer two open-ended questions:

1. *Please describe your most memorable personal experience with baboons. It can be positive or negative. Please share any details you can about how you thought, felt or reacted in the situation.*
2. *How did this experience shape your opinion of baboons' presence in your area today?*

This was followed by a series of questions that used multiple choice options and slider scales, which are easier to summarise than open-ended answers, and therefore the focus of this report. They answer some questions about "What?" is going on. To help us also answer "How?" and "Why?" questions, a more thorough analysis is underway and will also undergo scientific scrutiny before publication. Until then, we focus here on findings that are more straightforward and relatively unambiguous. Below, we also include some quotes from respondents' answers to the open-ended questions, for illustrative purposes.

FINDING #1: BABOON ENCOUNTERS ARE COMMON, AND INCREASING

One of the most central findings of the survey is how common baboon encounters are in the study area. Over 4 of 5 residents describe them as either *very common* or *relatively common* (Figure 2) and most people think that human-baboon interactions have been getting *more common*, and *worse* since they moved to their area (Figure 3).

Figure 2. How common are baboon encounters in your area?

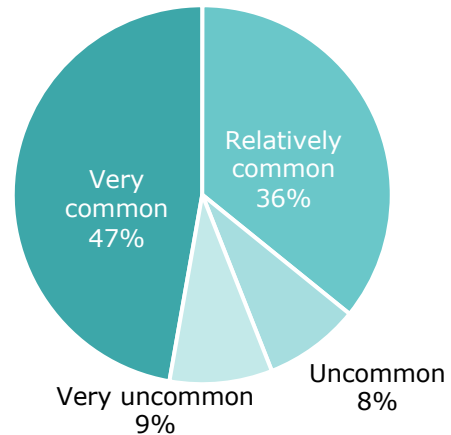
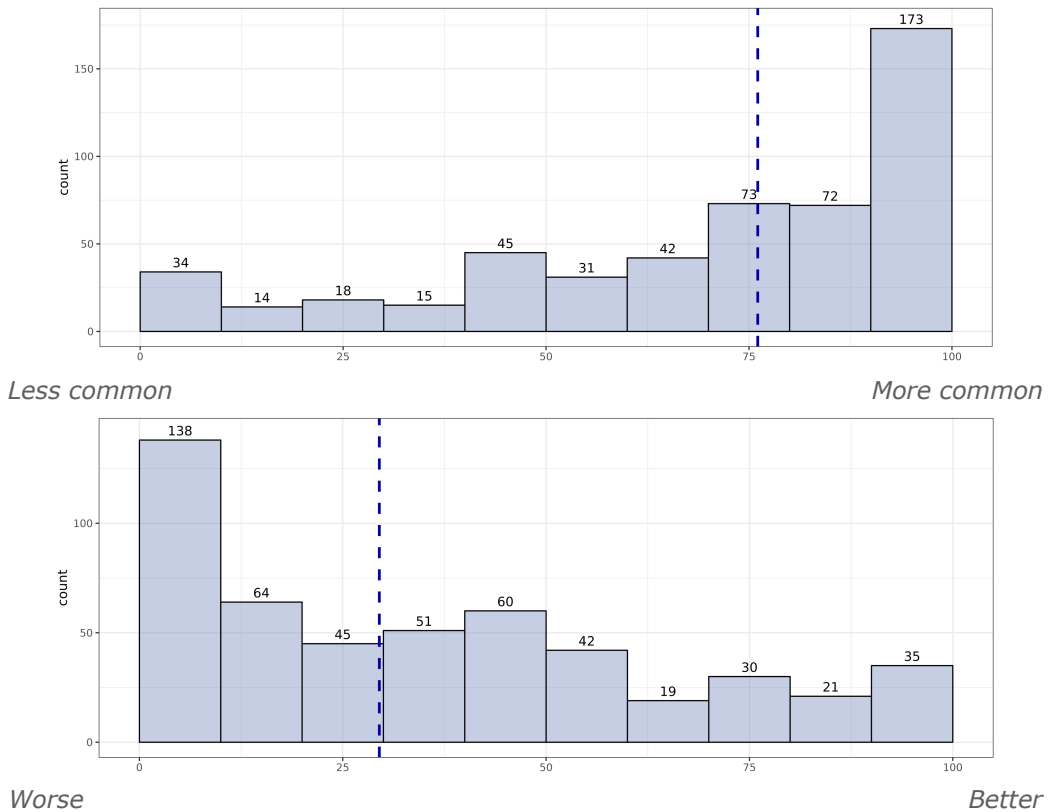


Figure 3. Since you moved to your area, human-baboon interactions have gotten...



It is also clear that many encounters happen close to where people live. When we asked people about memorable baboon experiences, almost 9 of 10 residents told us about encounters in- or outside their homes (Figure 4).

The most common feelings people recall from these baboon encounters were *concern*, *fear*, and *distress*, although many also felt *empathy* and *respect* (Figure 5).

Figure 4. Where did your encounter take place?

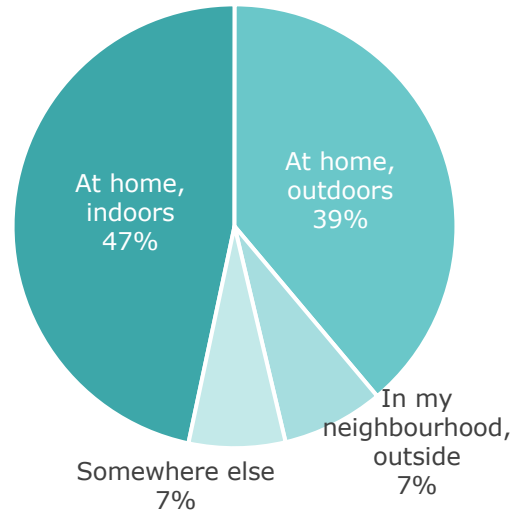
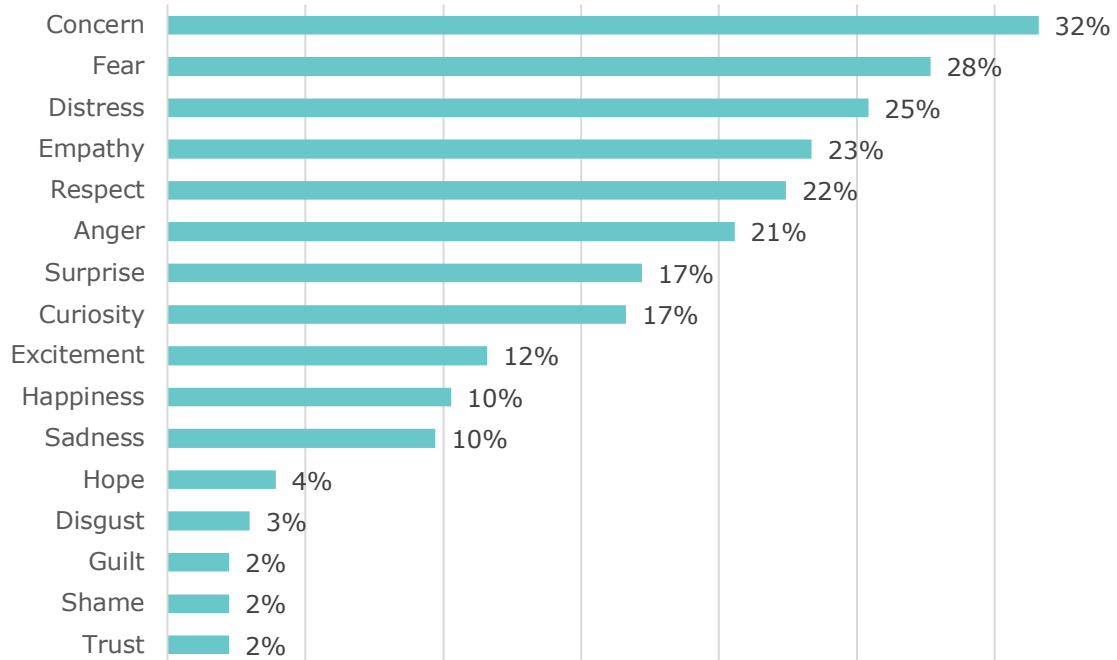


Figure 5. What feeling did the experience create in you?



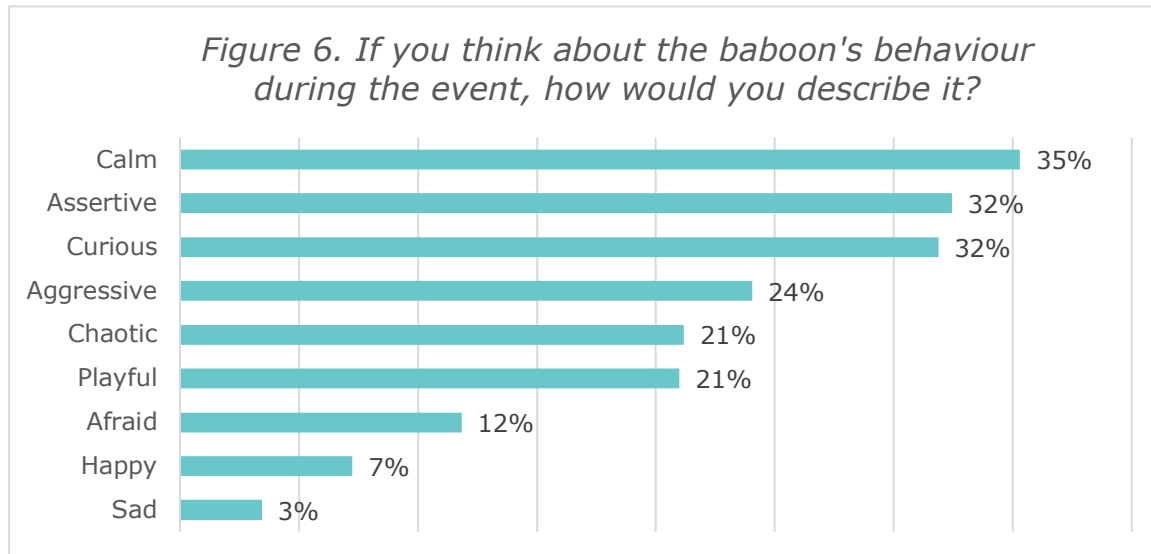
“A troop of approx. 17 baboons entered our property and destroyed most of our vegetables, swam in the pool, tried to enter our house but luckily our doors and windows were closed [...] Since the baboons moved into our area in Sept. 2020, [we are] too afraid to walk our dogs on the mountain, which before [...] we would do at least three times a week.”

– Respondent 101



FINDING #2: BABOONS ARE SEEN AS CALM AND ASSERTIVE, AND RELATIVELY RELATABLE

Although so many people encounter baboons at home and feel afraid or distressed, the most common answers given to describe the baboon's behaviour were *calm*, *assertive*, and *curious* (Figure 6).

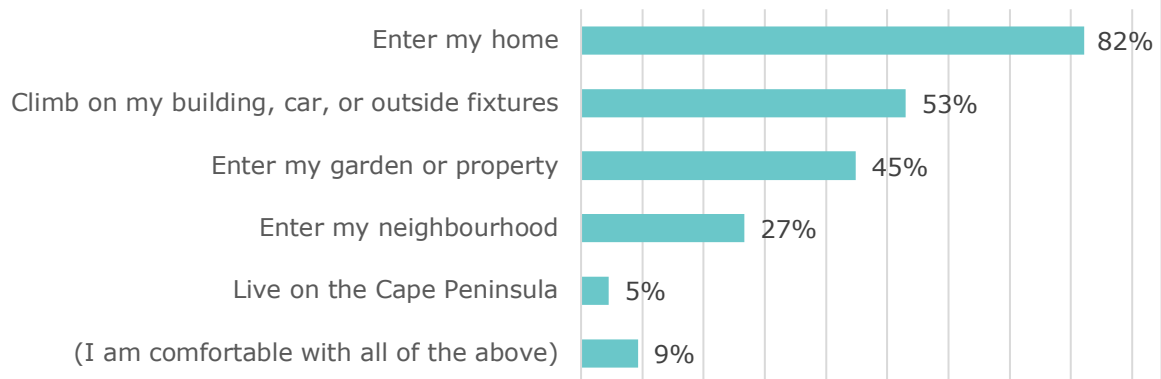


“We had a small group of baboons on our roof. They were shielding themselves from the wind and hiding from the rangers who were herding them south. They were calm and quite playful. When they noticed me they stared and proceeded to lick the window.”

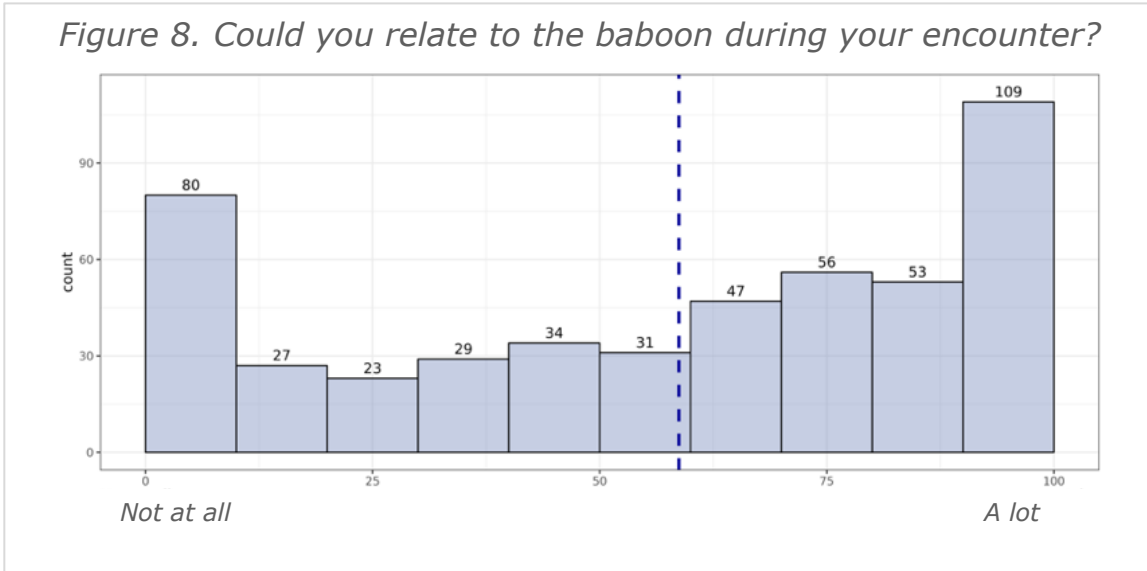
– Respondent 497

When we asked residents to think of what things should ideally be like, over 4/5 residents said that they would prefer if baboons did not enter their homes. However, only 1/20 want no baboons on the Cape Peninsula, and almost 3/4 residents are okay with them entering their neighbourhood (Figure 7).

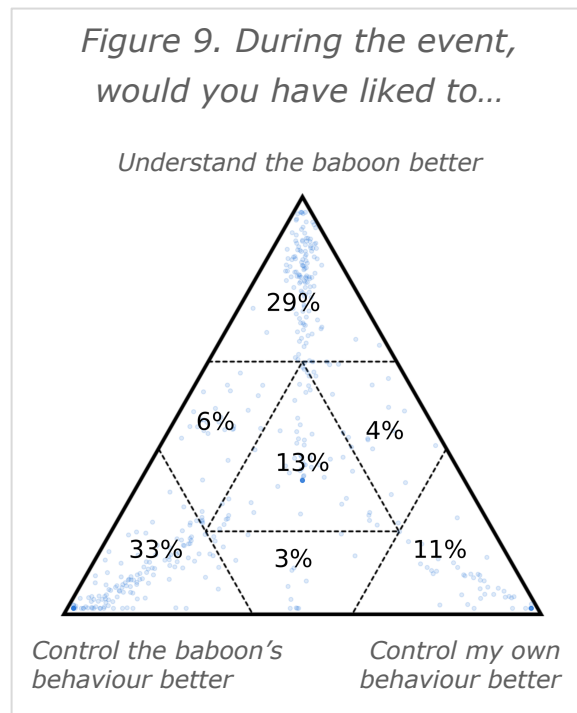
Figure 7. In an ideal world, what would you prefer if baboons DID NOT do?



More people say that they can relate to baboons *a lot* than *not at all*, however, our findings show a polarisation where many residents place themselves at either ends of the scale rather than most people being somewhere around the centre (Figure 8).

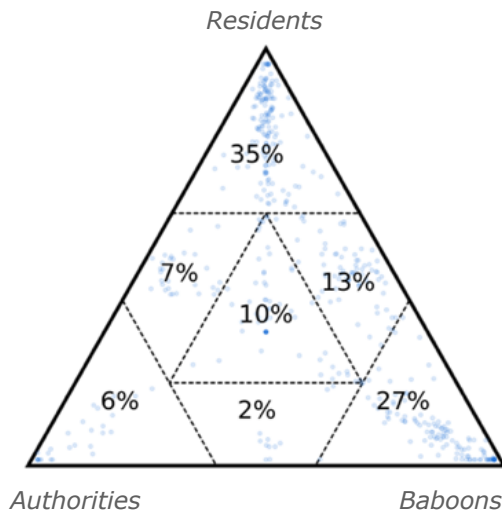


A similar divide emerged when we asked people to tell us if they would have preferred to *understand the baboon better*, *control the baboon's behaviour better*, or *control their own behaviour better* during the encounter. Here, we let residents place a marker inside a triangle to give their answer (Figure 9). Adding everyone's markers together, we see two main groups: those who want to *control the baboon's behaviour better* (33%), and those who would like to *understand the baboon better* (29%).



FINDING #3: URBAN SPACES AND RESIDENTS CAUSE NEGATIVE BABOONS INTERACTIONS

Figure 10. When there are negative interactions, who causes them?

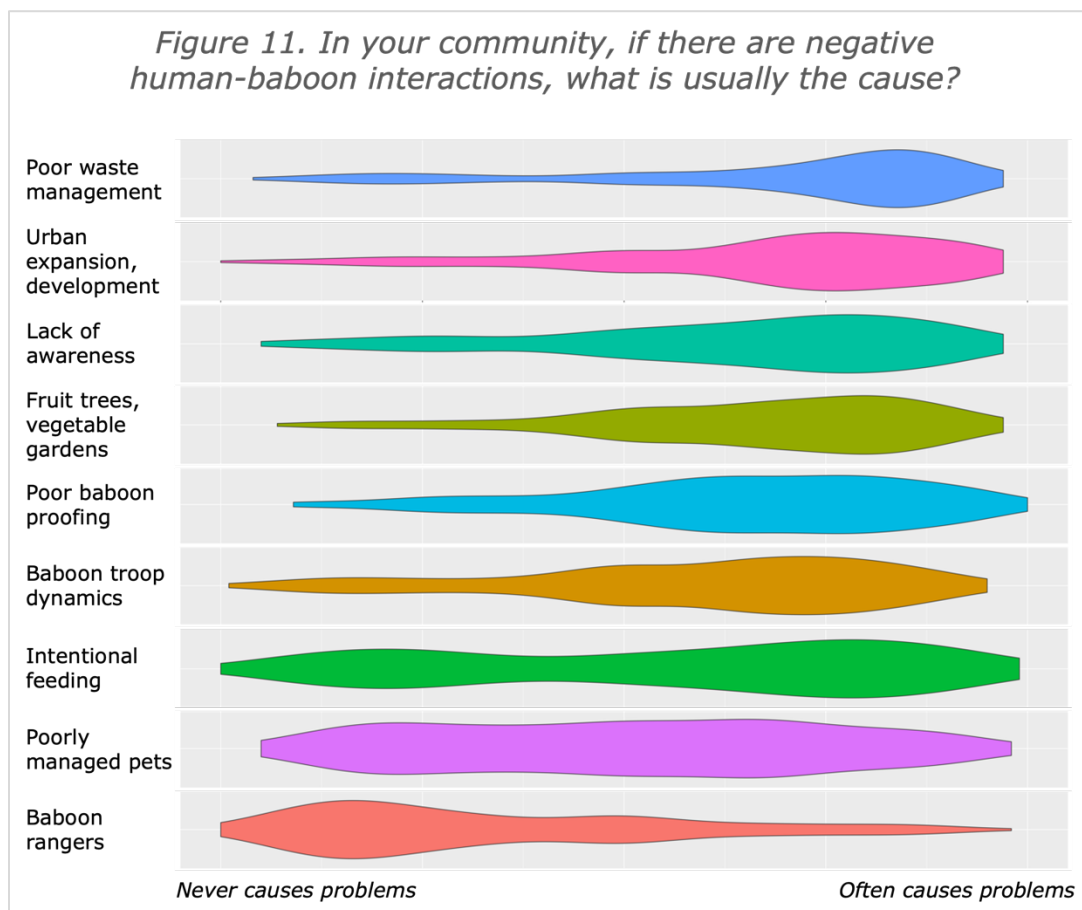


Negative interactions between people and baboons do occur. According to our survey, most people see *residents* as the main reason why this is happening – although quite a few also say *baboons* are the cause. Very few put the blame on *authorities* (Figure 10). When asked about other causes for negative interactions, poor waste management and urban expansion and development were rated as *Often causes problems* by most

“However, when they got into our garage and tore open rubbish bags being stored there, our amusement changed to anger tinged with a bit of fear. I got a stick and challenged them, yelling and banging the stick on the ground, and the baboons went away with food from the rubbish bags in their grasp. We have learned to always secure all

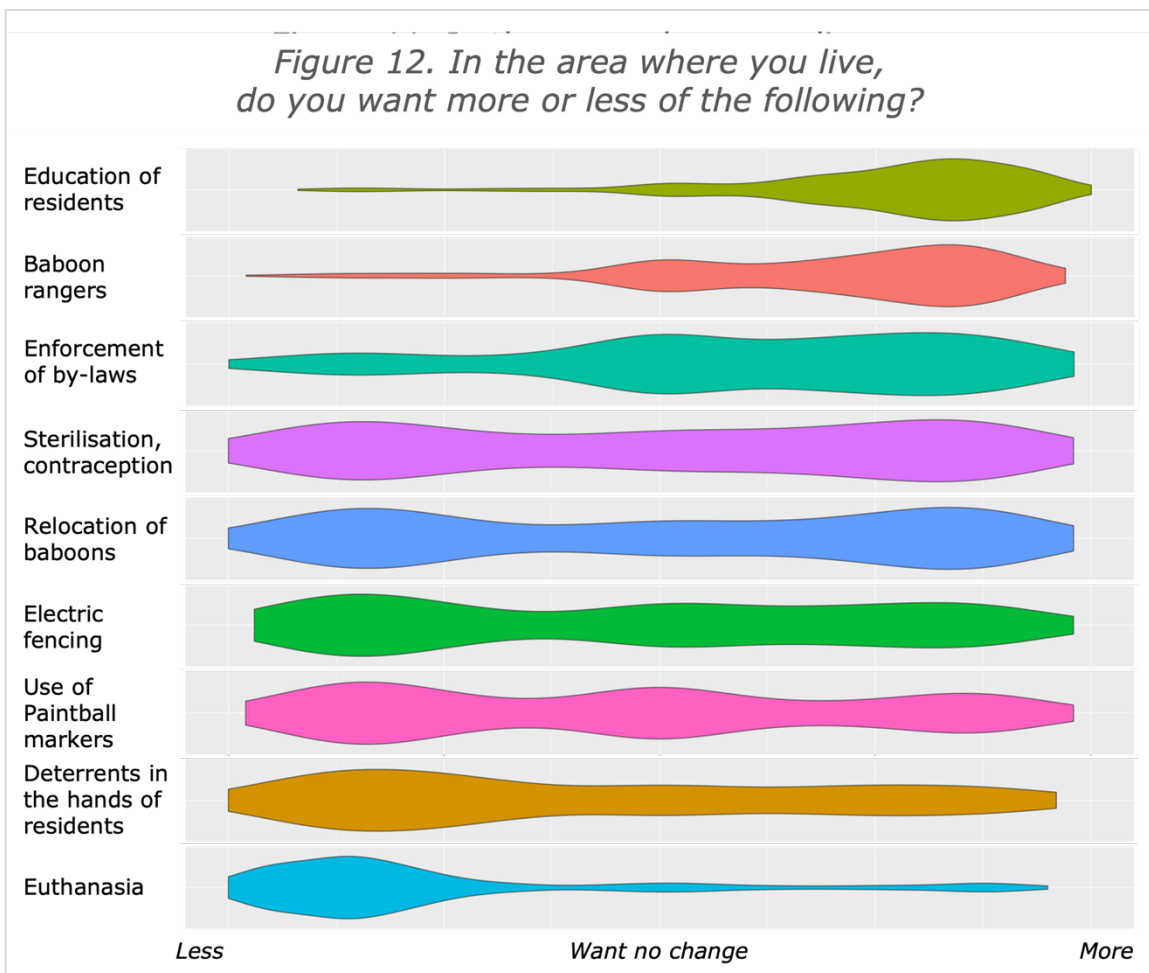
rubbish in baboon-proof bins, raising the alarm on our neighbourhood WhatsApp chat when baboons are in the area.” – Respondent 104

residents (Figure 11). Lack of awareness, fruit trees and vegetable gardens, and poor baboon proofing are also rated as causing negative interactions, as well as dynamics within baboon troops. Most people think that baboon rangers/monitors never cause any problems.



FINDING #4: PEOPLE DISAGREE ON A LOT – BUT THERE ARE ALSO AREAS OF AGREEMENT

Baboons are in some ways controversial and people’s views can be polarised regarding what should be done to address negative human-baboon interactions (Figure 12). This is particularly clear when it comes to actions that target baboon numbers or movements, such as *sterilisation/contraception, relocation, electric fencing, and use of paintball markers*. Here, people seem to cluster in groups with distinct views, rather being evenly spread out. By comparison, actions that target residents – such as *enforcement of by-laws* (mostly supported), and *deterrents in the hands of residents* (mostly rejected) – have most people in agreement, with smaller groups opposing the majority view.



However, there are a number of areas where there is clear agreement between most residents. First, almost everyone disapproves of *euthanasia* of baboons in their areas (usually referring to killing of individual “problematic” baboons that repeatedly reported to have entered people’s homes). Second, a large majority see a need for more *education of residents* to minimise negative interactions with baboons. Third, most people would like to have more *baboon rangers/monitors* in their area (Figure 12).

“The management of the troop by monitors has made a noticeable improvement on the frequency of visits to the homes on the urban fringe. The work they do is invaluable to [our] community. I think with more education perhaps residents too could play their part in making their homes less attractive to baboons.”

– Respondent 453

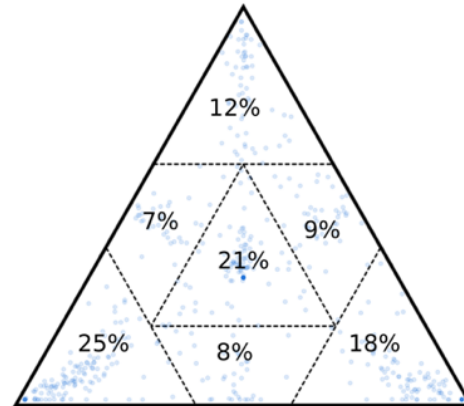


Photo: J. Enqvist

People are also divided on the question of who should be responsible for managing the relations between people and baboons (Figure 13). *Authorities* were pointed to by 1/4 residents. However, almost half of those who answered put their marker in one of the four fields in the centre of the triangle, indicating that most residents think that some combination of *authorities, civic organisations, collective local initiatives, and/or individual residents* should be responsible.

Figure 13. Who do you feel should be responsible for managing human-baboon interactions?

Civic organisations and collective local initiatives ought to do this



Authorities are ultimately responsible

Every resident needs to take individual responsibility

“Food sources and refuse disposal are being mismanaged and raiding baboons are being shot at as a result. [...] The baboon monitors with paintball guns seem to be very criticised by some anti-cruelty-to-animals rights groups. I understand that stance but [...] I fear that if the baboon monitors are removed from the equation – the killing spree is going to

escalate and the trauma for humans and baboons with it.”

– Respondent 269

Lastly, our survey found that baboon rangers/monitors is the group that enjoys the broadest trust among residents (Figure 14). They are followed by Baboon Matters, a local NGO working on the issue for many years, and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). Trust towards authorities, especially the City of Cape Town municipality, is lower than for all the other organisations and groups.

Figure 14. How much trust do you have towards the following groups/ organisations regarding baboon issues?

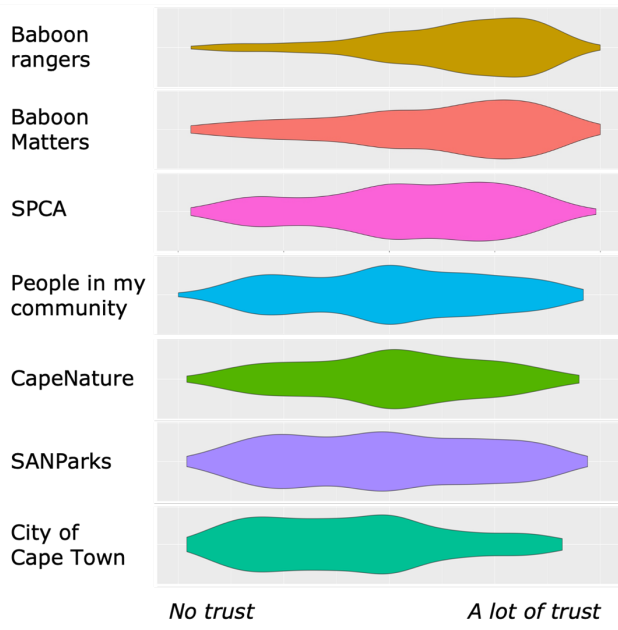


Photo: K. Psiuk

SO WHAT?

UNDERSTANDING THE FINDINGS, AND NEXT STEPS

WHAT WE THINK OF THESE RESULTS

Overall, a few things stand out to us when looking at these findings. First of all, it is important to emphasise how common baboon encounters are, including ones that happen inside people's homes. This suggests that virtually every household in the study area has been or will be visited by baboons. Despite this, when asked to describe their most memorable baboon encounter, not a single resident mentioned a baboon physically hurting a human in their neighbourhood. This does not mean that they can't be destructive, or intimidating – there is plenty of examples of those things, and that is still a problem.

Second, it is remarkable that so few residents (only about 1/4) say that they would prefer if baboons did not enter their neighbourhood. Most don't want them inside their homes, which is understandable, but the tolerance for them in urban areas is relatively high. This is something

we will try to understand more in our ongoing analysis, including comparing what these numbers look like for different neighbourhoods.

Lastly, many people do disagree on what to do about the baboons, but it is encouraging to see that most residents agree on several points: they don't like baboons being killed, they want more education for residents, they think poor waste management is a key problem, and they want to keep or ideally increase the number of baboon rangers/monitors. It is also worth noting that on many issues, most people fall somewhere in the middle. The baboon debate is often portrayed as highly polarised, but when looking at a representative sample of residents, a much more nuanced picture emerges.

Others would probably highlight different points from our findings than we have, and some might not agree with us about what parts are remarkable. We have collected this data, but others will have valid perspectives to add to how they should be interpreted and especially, what should be done about it. This study is not the only one, nor the only type of knowledge, that is relevant for this issue.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

We are aware that many residents and others are hoping to get a final 'answer' or solution to how baboons should be managed. Unfortunately, this report can't do that. Our aim is to contribute better information and knowledge about residents' situation, with the hope that this will help those who can and want to change things to understand that task better.

That said, we do want to do our best to take responsibility for the findings we share, and assist communities, decision-makers and other stakeholders with understanding what they mean as well as share the findings in other formats in addition to this report. We welcome invitations to come and present and discuss the findings in person at community meetings and similar events, and while we are not formally affiliated with any organisation or authority in Cape Town, we are happy to meet with and talk to anyone who wants to.

Later this year, in May/June, we are organising a series of community meetings in different parts of the study area, in collaboration with Empatheatre (www.empatheatre.com). This is a group of researchers and artists that have developed a way of using theatre as a tool for engaging with research findings in a way that is often more accessible and powerful than reading reports and scientific articles. Their approach has been particularly useful when dealing with complex problems and divided communities. For more information about these plans, and for general updates about the research project, please subscribe to our blog posts at our website, <https://unrulynatures.com/blog/>.