

March online column – “Shirley’s blog”

How to treat our visiting vervets

The following is not about the argument as to whether or not we should feed the vervet monkeys that troop regularly through our gardens in many areas. It’s about caring about other forms of life that share our environment, who are helpless regarding the loss of their natural territories, and who live their little lives at a severe disadvantage.

When real change takes place, it’s seldom a matter of just deciding to do things differently. It’s much more likely to be because we change the way we think about something and consequently see things differently.

It would be really good to see people thinking differently about the little vervet monkeys that pass through many of our gardens on their way to or from a patch of suburban bush or a piece of parkland.

Because we have taken over their natural territories, it is hardly surprising that we find them in our gardens and occasionally in our homes when they are hungry enough to enter via an open window or door to see what they can find to eat.

It is perhaps not generally known that monkeys remain territorial generation after generation. Troops are bonded to their territories through an inherited matrilineal link.

While reducing the content of some files recently, I came across ‘pro’ and ‘anti’ letters concerning vervet monkeys to the editor of the *Mercury*. Corrie Verbaan suggested a “feeding table in a remote corner”, a solution which he has found helps the vervets and does not encourage them to enter the house. Monkeys actually fear enclosure and are not likely to enter our homes unless they are looking for food. At times of the year, they are likely to be very hungry indeed.

It is true that people are generally advised not to feed them, but there are nonetheless people who do so and will continue to do so, and it is therefore sensible to suggest ways of doing this that are least likely to have adverse consequences.

Here are tips for those who love the little vervets (including me) and are not going to stop feeding them. One just needs to use proper procedures,

- Choose a feeding station near the periphery of your property.
- Preferably put food out before the vervets arrive.
- Put food on a garden table or box distant from the house, or even on the ground, but not in a container, as containers are more likely to encourage vervets to enter homes and take containers of food.
- Spread the food over two or three different areas to prevent it all going to dominant monkeys.

- Suggested food items include nuts, pieces of mealie, fresh vegetables and fruit, and wholewheat bread or crusts.
- When one puts out food just after darkness falls, one is likely to find that it has been taken by early morning... and that the vervets will have moved on to their chosen destination.
- If you feel you must chase vervets, use a light water spray. Do not do anything that would harm them or fill them with fear.

It will no doubt annoy some people to suggest that vervets should be cared about at all. And the answers to that is: yes, we *should* care about them. They are bright little creatures with powerful social relationships and a great deal of intelligence. Mothers love their babies, and other females in a troop are supportive of babies in the troop.

A moving video is doing the rounds. A young vervet, rescued and restored to health by an organisation when he was severely injured, is released in the neighbourhood in which he was found and at a time when his own troop is present.

He springs to freedom, dashes up a wall and finds he cannot get over the gutter. A female reaches out and pulls him to safety. The female is the baby's mother. She hugs him to her breast and is tightly hugged back. Both mother and babe are reluctant to let go. They cling together with their arms around each other, exchanging 'kisses'. This is bliss recaptured.

Other females move in closely, all wanting to stroke the baby and share in the joy. A male vervet moves nearer to observe, but does not interfere in these loving moments.

Mothers and baby monkeys separated from each other are known to suffer from depression. According to research sources, only one vervet baby in four is likely to live to adulthood. The little creature in this video now has a chance of doing that.

And what of human parents who buy air guns for their sons and allow them to shoot at helpless birds and monkeys and other small wild creatures? Shame on you for such thoughtlessness and lack of caring. It is naïve to claim that the intention was just to shoot at tin cans and targets. Why shoot at anything? One cannot separate guns and violent intentions.

If vervets are causing problems for you as a city dweller, seek professional advice from vervet monkey welfare organisations on how best to deal with your particular problem. There are ways that can be effective without causing harm. They might take a little effort, but seeing the big picture makes all the difference in the world.

Author Harari calls the factory farming system our most evil crime

Read Yuval Noah Harari's *Homo deus* if you are interested in speculations about the possible evolutionary effects of the introduction of non-organic parts into our bodies... and about the increasing effects of algorithms on our everyday lives, to a far greater extent than we probably suspect. We are becoming dominated by AI technology. But Harari is equally concerned about the suffering we cause to animals through iniquitous factory farming systems.

He is eloquent on the indisputable fact that animals in the factory farming system not only die horribly but live horribly every moment of their lives.

Humans are largely unconcerned about this. Why? Because we don't like to hear and see unpleasant truths. Ironically, many will put this down to their personal sensitivity. But it is not sensitivity; what it is, is self-protection. We find it easier not to think too much about what we do not allow ourselves to see, and what we never vividly visualise can more easily be thrust aside as being unimportant, or even irrelevant.

All people who can afford to do so should use free range eggs and meat. Battery birds live lives of sheer horror. It is far better for chickens to scratch a living on barren land in poor areas, usually along with at least some supplementary fowl food, than it is for them to live out their pitiful lives in wire enclosures with wire bases the size of an A4 page. And probably de-beaked and de-nailed. Think on this (often). Visualise this and see if you enjoy your roast battery chicken or your omelette made from battery bird eggs quite as much in future.

The adage says: Seeing is believing, but actually it is more accurate to say that we tend to believe what we *think* we are seeing. A plump chicken in its plastic coat in the supermarket looks merely like a familiar food item, all prepared for the table. This is the way we see it in its marketplace form. The real picture is hidden from us. We believe what we are seeing, but the animal product we see on the shelf is far from giving us the full (and appalling) picture.

Harari says: "What makes the fate of domesticated farm animals particularly harsh is not just the way they die, but above all the way they live." He points out that human treatment of farm animals constitutes cruelty *of the worst kind*. It is something we should not be finding it so easy to live with. It speaks volumes of us that we are largely able to turn a blind eye to the unacceptable.

Think about this. Talk about this. Be part of the voice speaking up for humane treatment and decent living conditions for those animals condemned to live their entire innocent lives in the cruel factory farming system. If we just silently accept this cruelty, we are complicit in it. Consumers are the people who can demand change. Go for it.

