

Watching rhino from the sky

A February newspaper feature on the killing of rhino for their horns in South Africa for 2015 gave the figure as “more than 700”, but this was widely inaccurate, as the actual figure given in official statistics was 1215. Here are the statistics:

2007	13
2008	83
2009	122
2010	333
2011	448
2012	668
2013	1004
2014	1215
2015	1175

These animals died for a superstitious belief: that powdered rhino horn has miraculous curative and revitalising qualities. My granddaughter, Cate, who was teaching English in Vietnam at the time, was proudly told by one of her private students that she had been given a container of immensely valuable rhino horn ‘dust’ as a 21st birthday present from her wealthy father. Unable to persuade the young woman that this represented the killing of a treasured animal for reasons of pure superstition, Cate told her she wasn’t able to see her again.

Esemvelo Wildlife’s new drone project will make the killing of our rhino by poachers a lot more difficult. The project will make use of sophisticated aerial and night vision imaging technology to assist rangers to pinpoint poacher activity. With the support of Peace Parks Foundation, Esemvelo has launched the Air Shepherd Unmanned Aerial Vehicle project. It will initially run for 14 months.

The drones are equipped with cameras and are able to transmit data to a command centre. Rangers are under constant threat from armed poachers while in the bush at night. The drones will provide crucial information regarding intrusion by poachers and will give rangers the advantage of surprise.

Calling evildoers ‘animals’ is just plain wrong

I must admit that it really upsets me to hear people who should know better – including the media and individuals like judges – referring to those who commit evil deeds as ‘animals’.

More and more we are finding out the many ways in which animals have abilities that are superior to those of humans. Isn’t it about time we gave them the respect due to them? But of course, were we to show them more respect, we would have to treat them better. We would have to worry more about factory farming, canned hunting, animals tortured for the sake of fashion, bear bile farming, circus animals, transport of animals, and a whole lot more.

In our SPCA Humane Education project for schools, we talk about the interconnection of all life and teach that what we do for others, both people and animals, shows what kind of people we are. By our behaviour, we give to life or we take away from it. We try to encourage the children to be compassionate human beings.

The little animal haven on our beachfront

Driving along the beachfront a couple of weeks ago, I thought how important it is for our Municipality to protect the small area of natural dune vegetation bush that still remains near to what used to be the old Snake Park site. No development must ever be allowed to threaten this small area that has survived from the past.

This is where Neil Friedman, known as the Mongoose Man, has taken care of a number of precious mongooses over the past fifteen years, a small population that has been joined over the years by cats and birds, and eventually a rooster and a chicken, thought to have escaped some beachfront sacrificial ceremony. One can appreciate how fragile the existence of these small creatures must be. One of the fowls had gone missing in the most recent report I read.

In addition to putting out food, Neil also fills containers with water and has found that these are sometimes stolen or are left scummy with the remains of detergent or soap, having been used by vagrants.

Some of the animals have also shown signs of injury. Neil is concerned that dogs are being allowed to run without leashes along our beachfront. The dogs are entering the dune area through holes in the fence.

The parade is a haven for walkers, cyclists, skateboarders, and dogs on leashes. Children run freely, and the atmosphere is warm and friendly. The small area of dune bush is all that remains of an earlier era. If this is one of your walking haunts, please speak up if you see dogs off their leashes. And, dog owners, please don't forget to bring your plastic bags for sanitary removal of any faeces that your animals leave along the parade.

Saving our frogs

Our Education Officer, Laura Pretorius, has several times come across playground incidents where children are attempting to kill small wild creatures. Explaining why cruelty is always wrong and working to change attitudes towards small wild creatures are important parts of our programme. Some children dislike or even fear frogs, and it is important that we try to educate them and help them to appreciate the role of these harmless and immensely useful small creatures.

In a *Tribune* interview with Liz Clarke, Dr Jeanne Tarrant, manager of the Endangered Wildlife Trust's Threatened Amphibian Programme, told of her passion for protecting these little amphibians. They are the most rapidly declining vertebrates on earth, and things would go very badly for us without them.

KwaZulu-Natal has six endangered frog species. Although pollution and disease take their toll, the greatest danger to frogs are human beings, mainly by destruction of habitat. Pickersgill's reed frog, *Hyperolius pickersgilli*, is found in KwaZulu-Natal, and nowhere else in the world. And even in KZN, it inhabits only a tiny area of coastal wetland no larger than 9km².

About 120 species of frog are found in our country, including one which grows to no more than 18mm in length. The largest species is a giant bullfrog which can reach 23cm and weigh up to 1.4kg.

Frogs are really important to us. They play a vital role in the environment. Some species consume thousands of mosquitoes a night. A healthy frog population is an indication of a healthy environment. Pesticides represent a real danger to them.

Dogs who recognise pending health conditions

Dogs are increasingly being used to recognise the symptoms of dangerous health conditions. Dogs trained to be alert to Diabetes 1 are able to alert diabetics to when their blood sugar is too low and they are in danger of a 'hypo' attack. Some diabetics miss the warning signs and could lose consciousness unless they take preventative steps.

Diabetes-alert dogs can recognise a change in body odour that indicates a drop in blood sugar level and have been trained to lick, nudge and stare at someone in this dangerous condition so that they can immediately access their medical kit.

Dogs can also be trained to act as an early signal when someone is about to have a seizure and are able to give as much as 40 minutes' notice, which allows people ample time to take their medication.

Dogs have been found to be able to reduce anxiety levels in autistic children within a matter of weeks of interchange. Dogs for Good is a UK Trust which runs a free scheme that helps train the family dog to help with an autistic child.

In the USA, Paws for Comfort uses a breed called Xoloitzcuintli (the Mexican hairless dog or Xolo) to help those with chronic pain. All dogs have a naturally high body temperature and, being hairless, the Xolo feels warmer than most. A dog snuggling up to one's body is really good for pain. (Perhaps it's also the love and trust.)

Many who live in residences for the elderly feel the loss of their pets. We are delighted when we hear of some enlightened place for the elderly that allows pets, subject to conditions of control by owners. But what would be a great advance would be for such organisations to take two or three suitable animals from the SPCA as 'pets of the establishment'. The warmth and affection of animals would bring such pleasure to many who are deeply missing having their own pets.