



DINNER SPEECH SAWMA SYMPOSIUM 2011 By Dave Pepler

“Jakkals trou met wolf se vrou*” - Comments on conflict in wildlife management**

***”*Jackal marries wolf’s wife*”**

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is with heartfelt sadness that I have to report tonight on yet another dilemma facing the members of the **South African Association of Wildlife Management**. First reported in *Die Son*, a leading Cape newspaper, and soon thereafter taken up by *Noseweek*, this story broke recently.

A well known sheep farmer from Brandvlei, Mr. Barend Moerdyk, living near Verneukpan, recently started reporting massive sheep losses due to exsanguination. Every morning he would find more and more sheep lying in pools of blood, showing only tiny bite marks to the great arteries of the neck, but with no other physical injuries visible. The traditional predators of sheep were quickly discounted since there were no tell-tale bite wounds and associated field signs near the prey.

In exasperation, Mr. Moerdyk started staking out his sheep at night, in the end resorting to expensive imported night vision equipment. To his utter amazement, later verified by sober neighbours, he found the culprit to be a hare. In bold moonlight, mutes of hares would approach the sleeping sheep and pounce with mighty leaps. Upon alighting on the hapless animals, they would inflict neck wounds, and then retire to lick up the free flowing blood. After feeding, *Lepus haematophagus*, as the vampire hares became quickly known, would disappear into the night, leaving the sheep to bleed to death.

Needless to say Mr. Moerdyk made quick work of reporting this to the local agricultural extension office, the NG Kerk, the Brandvlei Hunter’s Association and to the minister for Agriculture. The minister, keen to keep his political flock appeased, called an emergency meeting in the Brandvlei Hotel, which was a big mistake, with a wide representation of interested parties in attendance. Within minutes, the problems started - an almighty melee broke out when the chairman asked a tiresome speaker whether his train of thought had a caboose, after

which the meeting dissolved into chaos. The farmers were pitted against the ILLU (International Lagomorph Lovers Union), provincial conservation authorities, treading water, immediately requested a long-term study, a number *secunda donnas* from environmental NGOs preached holistic solutions and the spokesperson of the Pink Loerie Festival, saw sinister motives in targeting bunnies. In the back of the town hall, the voice of a tall, brooding scientist with a salt-and-pepper beard was heard to shout: "*If it pays, it stays*" just before the constabulary baton charged the unruly mob.

Is this a fanciful scenario? No, I think not, because we have ample historical evidence of *similar* conflicts arising throughout history. From the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (Sandars, 1960) we have reports of wolves taking both game and livestock, from the clay fragments of Tell el-Amarna (Murnane, 1995), Akhetnaten tells of marauding lions and hyenas, Herodotus (McCaulay, 1890) reported on this issue and from South Africa we have the detailed accounts of Anders Sparrman (Forbes 1977).

To this day the same problem persists universally with only the problem animal changing in time from feral hogs to fallow deer, badger lion, leopard, otter, coyote, jackal and caracal and locusts. In historic attempts to solve these issues, kings were pitted against serfs, Karoo farmers against conservation authorities and animal lovers against everybody else. Just in our country alone, the conservation issues around predators such as leopard, caracal, cheetah and black-backed jackal are constantly the subject of spats, recriminations and above all, a loss of precious time. Worst of all, in recent weeks the ugly spectre of party politics has joined the already unholy cocktail again, rife with sarcasm and posturing, especially so in the Cape Province.

What then do we stand to do in the face of such consistent failure? I am reminded of a passage from the profound *The lives of animals* by J.M. Coetzee where he offers, in passing, a kernel around which to start working towards a solution. I quote: "*When opponents are at loggerheads we say: "Let them reason together, and by reasoning clarify what their differences are, and thus inch closer. **They may seem to share nothing else, but at least they share reason**"*" (Coetzee 1999). Jakob Bronowski understood this only too well when he said: "*Man masters nature not by force, but by understanding*". Once reason is established, we can then move on to at *least* two points of departure.

Firstly, we should recognize and adhere to the central tenets of Conservation Biology (CB) as expounded, for instance, by Primack (2011). CB is a crisis discipline simply because decisions have to be made daily with limited information, and under extreme time pressure.

Some of its most important functions are the determination of the best strategies for protecting rare species, which brings me to an aside on rarity. We must be extremely careful in allocating rarity status to any animal if we are not

scientifically convinced that this is so. I am afraid that in many cases charisma and perceived value of a species override its true status. For instance, the once critically endangered Riverine Rabbit is now feeding in Tannie Kittie Vermeulen's carrot patch in the outskirts of Laingsburg.

The selection, design and placement of nature reserves and parks also fall under this function, as well as multiple use management plans for conservation areas and the *thorny issues* of conservation concerns versus the needs of local people.

The second point of departure is that of environmental ethics. Musings on this subject is nothing new, but certainly it took a pioneer like Aldo Leopold to bring it to the fore in his seminal *A sand county almanac* (Leopold 1949). But in 1988 Rolston took this discipline to new heights when *Environmental Ethics: Duties and values in the natural world* was published.

Environmental ethics are concerned with the moral relations that hold between humans and the natural world, that is, those never exploited by humans as well as areas modified by humans. **From this we derive that a human-centered theory of environmental ethics holds that our moral duties with respect to the natural world are ultimately derived from the duties we owe one another as human beings.**

So, we have:

- **human ethics:** that holding among ourselves
- **environmental ethics:** between humans and the natural world, and
- **ethics of bioculture:** concerned with the humane treatment of plants and animals in artificially created environments

In terms of competing claims and priority principles, which is when moral dilemmas arise when human rights and values are in conflict with the good of non-humans, they are *all* legitimate in human terms, as long as the real question of *appropriate alternatives* are met.

How easy it is to misunderstand one another. Years ago, in the early 1970s, my friend Rob Martin and I were asked to compile the first bird list for the Karoo National Park. On one of the early visits we were introduced to the previous owner of the land, in order to glean some historical data. There was only one problem though in that Rob could hardly speak Afrikaans, and the farmer even less English. After numerous brandies the farmer ventured:

"I hear, Mr. Martin, that you like birds?"

"Yes", Rob said: "it been a life-long passion for me."

He took a large gulp of brandy and said: “*You should have met my grandmother Mr. Martin. Now there was a woman who loved her birds. She would never leave the house without a shotgun or bird lime*”.

Science is simply systematized knowledge and is self-regulating. Because it is self-regulating it follows logically that we learn from our mistakes, make apologies and adjust opinions and management strategies continuously. In addition, it is worth considering van Hensbergen’s (*pers comm*) definition of conservation: “*Conservation is not a science but a multi-disciplinary management system: but, above all, it’s about **people***”. After all, we should consider ourselves to be educated and civilized scientists and this brings to mind Mencken’s famous statement at the Dayton trial in 1925: “*The cosmogonies that educated men toy with are all inordinately complex. To comprehend their veriest outlines requires an immense stock of knowledge, and a habit of thought*” (Wheen 2004).

This **habit of thought**, coupled to rigorous scientific discipline will allow us to make informed decisions on issues such as range collapse, density dependency and source-sink dynamics. New and powerful mathematical and statistical techniques give us high confidence in predicting, for example, population trajectories of problem species under different management options. A good example of just such an approach is multi-criteria decision analysis, such as recently used by Redpath et al. (2004) in solving a Scottish raptor-grouse conflict.

The same habit of thought will make us aware of rapidly changing human population demographics, especially in terms of, for instance, the historical use of herding with the aid of dogs and the age distribution of skilled and unskilled workers in the different environments impacted upon by problem animals.

The salient point I wish to make is this: if we de-humanize science, it will fail us spectacularly. And in the case of problem animals, out will come the animosity, threats, suspicion, sarcasm and politics – and finally the aldicarb (Temik) and, even worse, the strychnine. Environmental militancy is entirely acceptable if the militants argue and act from a strictly scientific and moral stance, in context, and above all with finesse. Broken trust takes generations to repair.

I wish to conclude with yet another quote from Jakob Bronowski, one that I feel offers us hope, and confirms the enormous advantage we have in being *responsible* scientists.

“*Science is a very human form of knowledge. We are always at the brink of the known; we always feel forward for what is to be hoped. Every judgment in science stands on the edge of error and is personal. **Science is a tribute to what we can know although we are fallible.** In the end, the words were said by*

Oliver Cromwell: "I beseech you in the bowels of Christ: Think it possible you may be mistaken."

*"We have to cure ourselves of the itch for absolute knowledge and power. We have to close the distance between the push-button order and the human act. **We have to touch people**" (Bronowski, 1976).*

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More about Dave Pepler: See next page....

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Two versions of Dave's resumé follow:

Version One: Well known environmentalist Dave Pepler's academic career started as a student at the Saasveld Forestry College. After working as technician, he became a Senior lecturer at the University of Stellenbosch and obtained his MPhil in Zoology from the University of Cambridge. Today he is environmental consultant, presenter for documentary television programmes and radio and a public speaker. He is also an associate member of the Centre of Excellence for Invasion Biology of the University of Stellenbosch. In 2007, he received the *Stevenson Hamilton Award* for his exceptional contribution to the field of zoology.

An excerpt from the letter of nomination for the *Stevenson Hamilton Award* describes him as follows: 'Dave is best known for his role as the presenter of the popular environmental TV programme "Groen" on "KYKNET". However, the breadth of his involvement in environmental matters is quite staggering extending as it does from the development of best management practices for the Chilean Forestry Industry through to environmental impact assessments both locally as well as elsewhere in Africa. In addition to his visibility in the electronic media, he is the author or co-author of more than 160 popular and semi-popular articles, and 200 popular lectures, press releases, and radio interviews through which he has effectively raised public awareness of the importance of preserving biodiversity, and the social implications of humankind's stewardship of protected areas.'

Version Two (Dave's version):

"Dave Pepler is now very old, with a supremely undistinguished career in academia adding to this state of decrepitude. He started his career as a forester where he quickly became famous for catching Gaboon adders to augment his income. After he drove a Bedford truck full of seedlings into Lake Sibaya, he thought it prudent to leave this career. Stellenbosch certainly did not improve his fortunes since his job as a technician confined him to a laboratory where he boiled the flesh off 34567 skulls. After a stint at a British university, he was suddenly welcomed into the rarified halls of academia, where he is chiefly remembered for playing Vivaldi in Ecotourism lectures. Since his retirement, he has been causing trouble all over the place, and getting paid for it. There ought to be a law....."