24 · *Reflections on 'Babooning'*

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I still look back on the fieldwork I undertook for my PhD as one of the most amazing periods of my life and an opportunity I was very fortunate to experience. Arriving in late 1996, I spent 14 months living on De Hoop Nature Reserve in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. South Africa was emerging from the shadow of the apartheid era at that time and, although its legacy was still clearly apparent, I fell in love with the country and its people. While the location of my current field site is now in the opposite corner of the country, my early fieldwork experiences ensured my research has remained situated in the Rainbow Nation ever since.

My PhD research focused on the behaviour and ecology of the chacma baboons living in South Africa's most southerly primate population. De Hoop Nature Reserve is situated approximately 50 km from Cape Agulhas, the southern tip of Africa, with the reserve's extensive coastline giving way to impressive sand dunes and a unique and diverse vegetation type – lowland fynbos. Having grown up close to the coast in Cornwall (UK), the climate and environment seemed familiar to me. Nevertheless, the wildlife, including the seasonal influx of the southern right whale and the resident endangered bontebok and Cape mountain zebra were wondrous additions. As were, of course, the chacma baboons I had come to study.

On reflection, there was a degree of good fortune about my field site that was not apparent to me at the outset. My initial intention had been to study the impact that predators have on primate behaviour, but if leopards were present at De Hoop, they were transient and at very low densities. In my pilot work earlier in 2016, I had visited other sites with

Figure 24.1 Dawn over De Hoop Nature Reserve, South Africa (Russell Hill)

much higher predator densities, which were impractical for that very reason – lions, buffalo and elephants all represent very significant risks when your method of data collection requires you to walk on foot alongside your monkey subjects. Fortunately, De Hoop was much safer from that perspective and by virtue of its location offered up new research questions. Serendipity always seems to make an important contribution to fieldwork!

Day length is an important constraint on behaviour. For species such as chacma baboons that conduct all of their essential activities in the daylight hours, the length of the day restricts the time they have available for foraging and other important activities such as grooming. By darkness, these animals need to have retreated to the safety of their sleeping cliffs. Seasonal variation in day length was thus an important factor for the baboons and in winter, when day lengths dropped below 10 hours and food availability was short, it placed a significant constraint on their foraging and social behaviour, which ultimately limited the size of group they could live in (Hill *et al.*, 2003). In contrast, the longer summer days gave the baboons unparalleled flexibility to respond to high midday temperatures and adopt a flexible thermoregulatory strategy that allowed them to take a siesta on their sleeping cliffs in the middle of the day – something not evident in equatorial populations (Hill, 2005, 2006).

Figure 24.2 Male chacma baboon from our habituated study group feeding in the flooded De Hoop Vlei (Russell Hill). A black and white version of this figure will appear in some formats. For the colour version, please refer to the plate section.

While these insights were important and unanticipated at the outset of my fieldwork, I also had not appreciated quite how the location of my field site would influence my daily schedule. Behavioural data collection on primates traditionally involves habituating the primates to allowing human observers to walk with them and collect observational data on their daily lives, from distances of just a few metres. This approach offers a fascinating window into their lives as you take part in the soap opera of their daily interactions. On arriving at the field site in early summer I was afforded with long days within which I could attempt to make contact with our focal groups, slowly acclimatising them to my presence. Once data collection began, however, this also meant very long days in the field since the protocol required us to follow the monkeys from dawn to dusk, collecting them at their sleeping site as the sun rose and staying with them until they retired again at night. In midsummer, data collection could start as early as 4:30 a.m., and there could be a walk of up to an hour to reach their remote sleeping site beforehand. The final data points could be at 8:30 p.m., resulting in nearly 18-hour days around the summer solstice. Rarely did I work more than a couple of days in succession at these times, despite the benefits to knowing where

you had left the monkeys the night before. In contrast, the modest working days of a little over 10 hours in winter meant that five days could comfortably be worked in succession such that data were quickly accumulated.

From memory, I never begrudged the early starts and long days. Some of the most amazing sights I witnessed were at dawn and dusk, and it was a privilege to be out (often alone) at these times. The light at dawn was often far more beautiful than at sunset. I still remember vividly the most intensely coloured sky I have ever seen on one of those dawn walks. The sight of a flock of flamingos against the dawn sky is an equally enduring memory. Likewise, one evening I was waiting for the baboons to move up to their sleeping cliff when a caracal walked slowly through the group, heading out on its nocturnal hunt. It was wonderful to see such a beautiful animal so close (by habituating the baboons, other animals also seemed to lose their fear when we were with them), but I also crossed another candidate off my list of potential primate predators; even relatively small juvenile baboons seemed unperturbed by its presence.

Fieldwork, for me, was a wonderful experience, bringing me so much closer to nature than any of the experiences I have had in other nature-watching contexts, such as safaris and game drives. It was such a defining experience in my own career that I have also looked to support others seeking similar opportunities. As a result, I have been lucky enough to have supervised over 20 research postgraduates, mostly PhD students, undertaking field projects in southern Africa, and I have enjoyed each of their individual journeys. In 2012, I was also fortunate to help establish the Anthropology Field Station, a permanent research base for the Department of Anthropology, and my Primate and Predator Project in the Soutpansberg Mountains of South Africa. While providing a base for long-term data collection, the field station also provides the accommodation to support postgraduate study as well as a variety of internship opportunities for those gaining their first experience of field research. The field station also supports our undergraduate field course. Fieldwork remains the cornerstone of anthropology and yet overseas field courses were essentially absent from undergraduate provision within UK Anthropology departments. Feedback from our students suggests the course is a highlight of their degree. I can trace my commitment to all of these activities to my time at De Hoop. I hope that some of our students will be as inspired by fieldwork as I was and that they look to pursue it to some extent in their subsequent careers.

References

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