

From sharks to baboons - insights into the wildlife wars

September 23 2014, by Verity Leatherdale

"In Australia the culling of sharks and the killing of crocodiles after human attacks are instances of the 'wildlife wars' taking place worldwide."

So says Professor Justin O'Riain, a behavioural ecologist who will present a Sydney Ideas talk on 24 September at the University of Sydney, on the background to this conflict and ideas for resolving it.

Professor O'Riain, from the University of Cape Town, has worked on a wide variety of southern African wildlife species including mole-rats, porcupines, meerkats, wild dog, baboons, lions, leopards, jackals, seals and white sharks.

"We try and understand the drivers of conflict by looking at the behaviour of the animals in relation to their environment and then proposing solutions. That requires translating science into wildlife management policy to try to solve the ongoing unavoidable battles between humans and wild species," said Professor O'Riain.

A decade ago in Cape Town human-baboon conflict was chronic and adversely affecting the lives and livelihoods of thousands of people and almost the entire population of baboons.

"Management was reactionary and the public irate at either being raided or because retributive killings of baboons were so commonplace. We committed to providing the city managers with data to make informed

decisions and to their credit they, together with a dedicated team of public representatives, have delivered a thriving baboon population and a much happier public with both improved lifestyles and property prices," Professor O'Riain said.

Other challenges have included encounters between humans and sharks at popular beaches in Cape Town.

"Here sound behavioural research by my PhD graduate Dr Alison Kock, together once again with innovating city managers, has paved the way for an alternative to culling with shark nets and drum lines," Professor O'Riain said.

Early detection using 'shark spotters' serves to reduce the spatial overlap between [white sharks](#) and recreational beach users during the summer months when the sharks come inshore.

"Beach users can assess the relative risk based on a series of flags and sirens that alert them to current shark presence or their likelihood of being detected. If people choose to swim when the risk is high then they are making a conscious choice and because the risks of an incident are so low some 99.99 percent of people feel like that it is the right one."

"In addition exclusion nets (versus the culling nets in use throughout much of Australia) offer families a fun day at the beach with no threat of an encounter with sharks.

"These are all simple and yet effective solutions that allow both top predators and other wildlife to persist in close proximity to humans," Professor O'Riain said.

Provided by University of Sydney

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