

Online Column for December 2015

THE ANIMAL ANGLE

Shirley Bell

‘Big Bangs’ cause neighbourhood anger

Guy Fawkes celebrations have at last been left where they belong... in the past. Since they celebrated an historical event that was not part of our own earlier history, nobody seems to mind that they have been spontaneously discontinued.

Diwali celebrations, on the other hand, are religious and spiritual in their intention and are therefore important to a great many South Africans, but to celebrate with big bang fireworks not only causes mayhem and suffering to animals, but, according to media reports, went so far this year as to involve threats of violence between neighbours in several areas, and even threats of using firearms in a couple of cases.

Some neighbours became so incensed over the excessive explosions that they resorted to fisticuffs and even stone-throwing. Diwali is meant to be a beautiful and deeply significant celebration, but there are always some who ignore the fact that big bang fireworks are illegal for very good reasons.

As is so typical of our country, the old issue of race came up in some places, but this is just not a valid accusation. Exploding big bang fireworks in residential areas is an anti-social act and nothing whatsoever to do with race. Not wanting to terrify animals and birds or cause them to run wild and be mutilated or killed on the streets, or lost and never reclaimed, has nothing to do with race. What an insult such an accusation is to those of all race groups who are too caring and responsible to use these offensive fireworks.

There are beautiful candles to light up pathways, cascades of lights, Catherine wheels, dazzling sparklers, and rockets that do not explode with the resonance of bombs. Children love such displays. But there is nothing spiritual about resounding explosives that terrify and cause injury and even death.

Christmas lies ahead... another celebration calling for peace and goodwill towards all, religious or otherwise. If only...

Our beachfront ‘wildlife’

The Independent on Saturday published a photograph of two of the roosters that had taken refuge in the bush at North Beach and were photographed by a friend of car guard Rusty Dewinaar. According to a resident, people slaughter goats and chickens on the beach in ritual sacrifices, and the roosters apparently managed to escape and take refuge in the bush.

In our December 2015 issue of *The Animal Angle*, we report on the announcement by the Gadhimai Temple Trust in Nepal that no more animals will be killed in Nepal’s five-yearly ceremonial sacrifice to Gadhimai, the Hindu goddess of power. The Trust has decided that it was time to transform this old tradition and to replace the killing of millions of animals throughout Nepal over the years with peaceful worship and celebration.

The sacrifices are over. Why? Because animal advocates all over the world campaigned. and because those in charge of the festival listened, re-thought the consequences and the meaning of the sacrifice, and decided that peaceful worship served the purpose far better.

Rusty Dewinaar says it is “nice to have nature around”, He feeds the birds around six every morning. Some residents are bothered by the early morning crowing, and some are not. Joan Stannard, a local resident, says “We live in a city and don’t have the pleasure of animals, so it is nice to see them around.” Beulah Lange is another who is happy to have the birds and small animals in the bush. Ismail Gani had not heard the birds as does not live in the immediate area, but says: “Even if I were living close by, I don’t think I would be bothered by them. Instead, I would be happy for the natural alarm.”

So people differ in their responses. Some love what others regard as intrusive.

Neil Friedman, Durban’s well-known Mongoose Man, is seriously worried about the future of his little ‘menagerie’ that lives in the dune bushes because their lives are being threatened by vagrants living in the area.

People walking along the beachfront promenade know Neil well. About fifteen years ago, he began caring for mongooses living in the old Snake Park area. This is the very last of the dune vegetation left along our beachfront. At first, there were mongooses, cats and birds, and then a rooster and a chicken arrived. So Neil’s family kept growing.

Then he began to find soap and detergent in the water bowls left for the animals. The bowls were tied down to prevent their being stolen, and now they are being used by vagrants for washing clothes and ablution.

Even more disturbing, some of Neil’s animals have been showing signs of injury. He is also worried that dogs are being allowed off their leashes along the beach front and get into the dune bushy area through the fence where they eat the food he has left for his animals. The latest news we heard was that one of the roosters had gone missing. Neil looks after this little menagerie at his own cost.

Bear cull seen as a ‘trophy hunt’

It seems that American attitudes are noticeably shifting to disapproval of trophy hunting and canned hunting since the crossbow death of Cecil, Zimbabwe’s iconic lion, lured from a game reserve to be slaughtered by an American trophy hunter. Cecil was wearing a GPS collar. He left behind several cubs.

A recent bear cull in Florida, USA, has brought recriminations from both the public and conservation authorities. At a cost of approximately R1,350 each, about four thousand ‘hunters’ took part in America’s first official black bear cull in over twenty years. Some of the hunters were as young as sixteen.

Wildlife campaigners regarded the killing of 295 black bears as a ‘trophy hunt’, since successful hunters get the heads and pelts. The US Humane Society commented that many cubs will have been orphaned by the massacre. Serious research is an essential prelude to culls of any kind. Many culls of wild animals have turned out to be ill-advised.

The hunt was approved after claims that a handful of maulings by bears had taken place in suburban streets, that intermittent property damage occurred, and that there was a danger to road traffic, with some two hundred black bears killed by motor vehicles in a year.

The Princes work for conservation

King George V was a proud killer of Bengal tigers, rhino and bears. Photographs of 104 years ago show him surveying the corpses of several tigers and bears while on a hunt during an official visit to Nepal. But ways of thinking change, and today his great-

grandsons, William and Harry, are devoted to wild animal welfare. Harry has worked with conservationists to save Namibia's nearly extinct black rhino, and both the princes speak out strongly against the trade in rhino horn and ivory. William is patron of the Tusk Trust which operates in Africa.

Wild environments diminish as humans increasingly compete with animals. African lions have lost 80% of their habitat over the last half century. Lions are killed for their trophy heads, or their bones, or simply because they are there. Killing a magnificent wild animal gives curious pleasure to some. Yet what these trophy hunters destroy so wantonly can never be replaced once lost. More worrying is the bloodlust such hunts encourage.

Hunting, shrinking habitat, and superstitious beliefs about the efficacy of ground lion bones for health, wealth and virility are taking their toll. The African lion population has dropped from 250,000 only forty years ago to an estimated 30,000 today. A new study indicates that the number of lions in Africa could be halved during the next twenty years, and the researchers are asking that the status of the species be upgraded from "vulnerable" to "endangered".

Sharing digs with a mamba

Nick Evans has no fear of even the most dangerous snakes. In fact, if you need to have a snake removed from your home or office, call Nick on 072 809 5806.

Earlier this year, he was called to a shack off Florence Nightingale Road in Chatsworth and went to investigate, along with some firemen, at half-past eight in the evening. (Firemen get involved in many unusual emergencies and often assist the SPCA in rescues in difficult localities.)

The inhabitants of the shack had grown used to seeing the snake basking on the roof or wound round a branch in a nearby tree.

Once inside the shack, Neil could hear the snake moving around above his head. When he tapped the asbestos ceiling with a broomstick, a black mamba stuck its head out of an opening.

Then it disappeared and reappeared at another gap in the ceiling. Looking through one of the holes, Neil could see the mamba curled up. He poked at it with the broomstick, and it began emerging from the ceiling through another hole. He was able to secure it behind its head with his grabstick.

It had been sharing quarters with the family for a considerable time and had made no attempt to attack them... but living in close proximity with one of Africa's most dangerous reptiles is not without its challenges.

With the mamba's head held firmly in his hand, Neil encouraged the children to come and touch it gently. Touching a snake can change a person's perceptions about reptiles, he says. People's immediate response is often to kill a snake, whereas getting to know about them engenders understanding and respect.

This particular mamba was released into a game reserve area far from human dwellings.

A cat story with a difference

A friend has just sold his luxury car before going overseas. Replying to an enquirer, he wrote a hasty e-mail: "My cat is a 2015 sports model, purchased for R485,000. It is in superlative condition." Only some time after pressing 'send' did he realise that he had typed 'cat' instead of 'car'. He quickly typed an apology and a correction, but the

enquirer had moved on, clearly having already decided that he was not in the market for a luxury cat nor for dealing with someone with a warped sense of humour!