



AFRICAN PENGUIN MARIETJIE FRONEMAN

THE bigger PICTURE?

'A single death is a tragedy,
a million deaths is a statistic'

JOSEPH STALIN

There's a sizeable body of literature that shows convincingly that when there's a need for help, humans respond far more generously to individuals than they do to entire causes. Helping those in need is a fine trait that is universal to all societies, and one which only psychopaths lack. Stalin's quote above captures the essence of that issue, albeit in a chillingly clinical way.

Our natural sense of empathy is stimulated powerfully when we see an animal in distress. Most of us are compelled to help ease or end the animal's suffering, particularly when humans have caused the suffering in the first place. We find it much more difficult to generate emotion (which can lead to positive action) for abstract concepts such as a famine, war – or a decreasing population of a bird species.

This instinct to nurture ailing creatures has given rise to dozens of initiatives for animal rescue and welfare centres in South Africa. In the bird world, this is a considerable industry in its own right. Rehabilitation centres, sanctuaries and private zoos take in injured and sick birds, and can achieve amazing feats of recovery. Many offer an important educational role, and some even release animals back into the wild.

Conservation action should address the greatest or most immediate threats to a species. It is also geared (broadly speaking) to spend more time and money on the habitats and species of highest conservation concern. This is why BirdLife International created the Preventing Extinctions Programme – to focus money and efforts at the sharp end of conservation for species that could go extinct in our lifetime unless we take concerted action.

I have no problem with rehabilitation activities – they meet a very human need. However, branding animal rescue and rehabilitation as a conservation action is inappropriate. It confuses two very different activities. Many people struggle to understand the difference between saving individual animals and preventing extinctions. When stated as baldly as that it might seem an overstatement of meaningful proportions. But it's an easy mistake to make. Surely if you save one animal you are helping to save the species?

Unfortunately, the numbers simply don't stack up that way. In South Africa there are very few species in which every individual is critical to the survival of the species. Fundamentally, if you're not addressing the cause of the species' population decrease or fixing the problem at the scale of the population, you're not effecting conservation.

Another argument in support of the 'rehabilitation is conservation' equation is that every little bit helps, and it's certainly not doing any harm. If you consider the direct costs of rehabilitating an individual, such as

food and medical supplies, you'd probably come out in support of welfare centres on balance. But those costs are trifling compared to the expense of paying for staff and running a fully-fledged organisation. When those costs are included, even the most efficient rehabilitation centres will end up spending tens of thousands of rands on each animal 'saved'. This cost-benefit view places rehabilitation in stark contrast to conservation, where similar amounts of money, time and effort can change the fate of an entire species or whole suites of species.

At times, rehabilitation and conservation are closely aligned. Of the few examples, the best known is a local one, during times of oil-spill crises. NGOs, researchers and government joined forces with the public in massive and ultimately successful ventures to prevent enormous losses of African Penguins twice in recent times, during the *Apollo Sea* oil spill in 1994 and the *Treasure* in 2000. Without those efforts, the demographic dip that would have resulted would still be visible in penguin numbers today.

If readers care about remedying the sad, often avoidable impacts of humans which cause great suffering to animals, they should support animal-welfare efforts. If they care about ensuring that indigenous bird species have healthy populations, underpinning healthy ecosystems for future generations, then they should support conservation organisations.

ROSS WANLESS

Manager: Seabird Division

BirdLife South Africa