**World Owl Conference 2017, Évora, Portugal**

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I am from South Africa and I am here to talk about a program we run there with children and owls. We have the same problems as Raju in terms of mythological fears and that kind of thing. In South Africa owls are protected, they’ve got lots of protection, legislative protection and permits are required and all of that but we don’t have any enforcement. We don’t have the capacity to enforce, nature conservation officers are understaffed and underpaid and undertrained and all of those things.

Owls are not rhinoceros, which are a big thing in South Africa but owls don’t really play a big part and there is also a lot of mythological fears that run right through from government departments through to children.

So what happens in our project? We get a lot of baby owls handed in every year and these owls come from townships. Because of the high rodent populations in those townships we get barn owls trying to access there and they get into roofs and breed there and produce chicks in the roof and because of the ill will that people have towards owls they seal them up in the roof, or they spray them with doom or they kill them.

So when we get a call saying ‘we have owls under our roof and we don’t want them there’ our dilemma is what to do with them. First of all we try to convince people to leave them there until they fledge, and if they really don’t want them there then we remove the owls to the closest participating school. Now a school in a township is a good place to release owls from because it is the only open area. The kids have to raise those young owls in a hacking box and release them from the school where it’s quiet at night and we know there are rats at the school for those owlets when they are fledging after being hacked and it is very educational for the children. It’s quite the hands-on program that these kids are involved in. It’s township-owls staying in townships. Our dilemma was do we take these owls out of the townships to release them somewhere else or to leave them in these townships. The reason we like to use live owls, and we use a program that includes owls is because most of the kids in these areas don’t have access to television, they don’t have internet, they don’t have books so they actually don’t know what an owl looks like and they’ve got a mythological concept of an owl which is a fire-breathing owl, and in South-Africa, as it is in many countries, it is thought that if an owl lands on your roof, someone in your family is going to die. Also the hacking-technique from releasing owls exactly from where they were found is good science for us, it’s better than taking them off and try to release them somewhere else.

So if we get a call from a guy in a township who hears an owl under his roof, we send kids from our project to him to speak to him. So the kids from his own area have a chat with him and say to him: ‘leave the owls, leave the owls’ and as soon as they fledge, we can go there and put up an owl-box and seal off your roof so they don’t come back into your roof and the kids are fantastic ambassadors for this project. They tell people in their own area how important the owls are to them.

The problems that we have with our project is first of all the NSPCA are opposed to any live owl or other animal used in education and they are not supportive of this project because of the live owl-child interaction. And also in South Africa we’ve got a lot of animal rights institutions or organizations that feel that kids are not going to be able to look after owls. We’ve released over the last 15 years 1,700 barn owls in this program involving 100,000 children and maybe 4 or 5 owls have died in this project. Barn owls are pretty resilient to begin with and these kids feed them and look after them and once they have fledged and are flying around the school they still feed them until they are able to hunt on their own. The other problem is that if there is an owl mortality in one of these schools, there are a lot of people that jump in saying: ‘look, this isn’t working, there is a dead owl’ so it makes it a little bit precarious at times because you are being judged by your failures and not by your successes unfortunately.

So 75 schools and 100,000 children have been involved in feeding owls, doing pellet dissections, and all of these kids have signed parental consent, not because of any risk to the child, but it is because their parents have to accept that their kids are going to be involved in something actually to do with owls with all the mythological fear that surrounds owls, so the parents have to say: ‘ok, I am prepared to have my kids involved.’ The enemy of my enemy is my friend is the simple message we are trying to get across, since rats are a serious problem in townships. And also about 100 people including children die every year because of eating poison used to kill the rats (not the allowed rodenticides since those are too expensive) but stuff that they can buy on the side of the road, stuff that is forbidden in Europe and America. So a lot of the project also is about litter and enviromental education, since rats are such a huge problem.

So we do owl pellet dissections with the kids, which is very good for these children because they quickly understand the correlation between owls and their biggest problem which is rats. Kids count the pellets, take photographs, describe where they were found and all the information about the pellets, including GPS-coordinates, goes into a databank at the owl project and at the end of the year the children get a report of how many rats the owls have eaten. The kids take ownership of the project, they get quite attached to the owls. Also they make owl art at school and put it on the fences of the school, so everyone passing by sees that there’s an owl-friendly school.

We ask the kids a lot of questions, like ‘do you think owls are scary’ because that’s about the main thing, the mythological fear of owls. A year after they’ve participated 2,000 kids were asked questions again to see the sustain of the project, and they were still owl-friendly, their mind-set has been changed. They don’t think owls are scary or can be used for muthi [black or white magic]. The same questions were asked their parents, and there the same change has been observed. These kids have been given parental consent, they educate their parents about owls and their parents also become owl-friendly. And kids who aren’t participating (also 2,000 kids got the same questions), don’t have owl-friendly parents.

All owls in the project are ringed, ring-recoveries are collected. It’s pretty simple and straight-forward, Jonathan concludes.