



Conservation Corner

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Nature's Gardeners of The Night

Throughout South Africa there are streets, farms, and rivers whispering secrets of a lost world. In Prince Albert we have Seekoegat Road, Wolwekraal Nature Reserve and the nearby Gamka (*Lion*) River. As a nature lover, I often enviously eye the past, to a time when the land was teeming with these places' namesakes. Happily, I am also constantly reminded that we are still surrounded by an extraordinary abundance and diversity of wildlife. Often overlooked and underappreciated. One such animal is the humble Cape Porcupine.

Cape Porcupines are the largest rodents in Africa and the largest of all porcupine species globally. They weigh anywhere between 10 to 20 kilograms, some reaching a whopping 30 kilograms. Porcupines are easily recognized by their spines and quills which can measure up to 30cm and 50cm respectively, providing a formidable defence against predators. When threatened porcupines rattle the hollow spines on their tail. Having once bumped into a porcupine at night in the Cedarburg - I can personally attest that it sounds pretty intimidating.

Porcupines, hopeless romantics that they are, live in small family groups centring around a monogamous breeding pair, which mate for life. During the day they shelter in caves, rock crevices, and burrows; venturing out at night to forage for roots, fruits, bulbs and bark. They also have the curious habit of chewing on bones to supplement their mineral intake as well as sharpen their teeth. They have even been recorded raiding ancient tombs of the dead in Israel!

Porcupines are often considered as pests by farmers due to their digging abilities. Their meat is also highly prized in much of rural Africa. However, porcupines are far more important than most people realize, often referred to as ecosystem engineers due their extensive diggings in search of food. The hollows left behind trap nutrients, seeds and slows the flow of water. This provides the perfect 'nursery' for many species of plants.

In savannah systems they also provide another important service through the ringbarking of trees. In these ecosystems, trees tend to dominate without the presence of limiting factors, such as fire and herbivory. Particularly now that elephants have been removed from much of Africa's savannahs, the important role that porcupines play in maintaining a balance between woodland and grassland should not be underestimated.

Unfortunately, the very same habits of porcupines which contribute to healthy ecosystems, are also what lands them in hot water with humans. Their tendency to dig holes under fences, chew on irrigation pipes and attack farmers' root crops has resulted in them being heavily persecuted in some areas. For example, local extinctions have occurred in parts of the Eastern Cape due to subsistence hunting and persecution by farmers.

Despite the damage porcupines can cause, there are many solutions allowing for peaceful co-existence between humans and our prickly friends. Irrigation pipes can be buried underground. Swing gates or even old tyres can be built into fences to allow for the movement of small animals between areas. Damage to one's crops will never outweigh the negative consequences of a degraded landscape, which can take generations to recover.

We must adopt a less combative, more holistic approach to the natural world. Once we do, we will see there is plenty of space for both us and these wonderful little gardeners of the night. ■



A porcupine's spines and quills provide a formidable defence against even the most fearsome of predators.

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