

The **PANORAMA** *interview*

**BRIAN
McCANN**

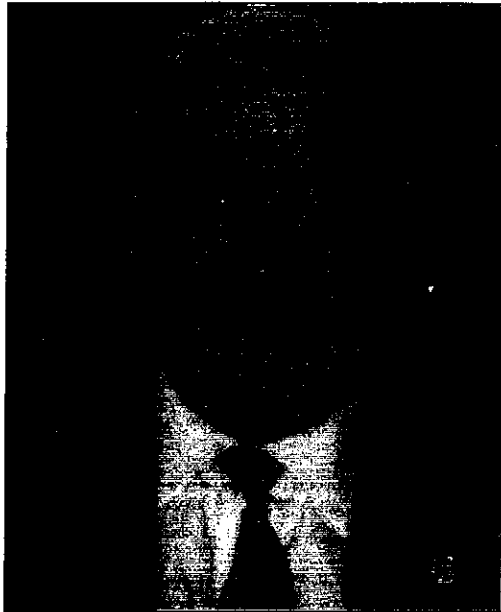
interviews...



Ernest Britto

Minister for the Environment and Tourism

The great ape



Is it correct that the Government intends to cull pack of 25 macaques – and if so why has the situation reached this stage?

The relatively small size of Gibraltar and the proximity and easy access to the residential areas by the Barbary Macaques (or "apes" as they are commonly known although they are technically monkeys) which are essentially wild animals, present problems not encountered when animals are in captivity in zoos or parks. The Gibraltar monkey troops roam freely on the Upper Rock, their natural areas of habitation, but occasionally and despite efforts to prevent them from doing so, they migrate and take up permanent residence in or near built up areas.

Groups of monkeys occasionally splinter off for natural reasons, as for example when adult monkeys mature due to internal conflicts in the pack. The less dominant splinter group will then move away to find another area. On this occasion, splin-

ter group on the Upper Rock has become habituated in the Catalan Bay area, despite attempts to discourage them and to relocate them to the Upper Rock, they have become established there. These have become health hazard and nuisance to the population residing in the area, and therefore drastic action is necessary.

Despite efforts to relocate them dating back to the end of last year, this pack remains in this area continuing to cause considerable inconvenience and health and safety hazards to the inhabitants of Catalan Bay. Both Worlds and tourists in the Calet Hotel. Windows have to be kept permanently closed, as monkeys regularly intrude into homes, cars and have even been known to snatch shopping bags being carried by persons; or open kitchen cupboards. As well as the natural fear caused, espe-

cially in younger children, the element of health hazard cannot be ignored as these monkeys can transmit food-borne contagious diseases on contact and through bite.

The exportation of "apes" is always the preferred option and the first to be considered. However, exportation is only possible if there is suitable destination and willing recipient. None have been identified recently despite continuing efforts to do so. It is therefore not possible at this time to send these monkeys away from Gibraltar.

In these circumstances,

'It is known that culling has been used for many years'

and very reluctantly, the Government has decided that it has no option but to accept the advice given by the experts in this field and to take action to correct the situation. Regrettably the only such action available to it is that of culling.

There have been worldwide angry protests about the decision, and the Government has been criticised for not investing in resources for the management of the macaques. What is your response to them?

There have indeed been worldwide protests about the decision, but these are mostly based on lack of knowledge of all the facts

culling controversy

and of local factors outlined in answer to your previous question.

It is not correct that the Government has not been investing resources in the management of the Macaques. Since November 1999 GONHS have been contracted by Government to exercise the care, control and management of the Barbary Macaques of Gibraltar. The welfare of the monkeys is in the hands of dedicated team of people and the various troops are supplied with fresh water and fed twice daily. The GONHS contract ensures that there is liaison and co-operation with an appointed Veterinary Surgeon (also on contract to the Government), and the "apes" are regularly examined and medically treated when necessary by this vet.

Even the thoroughly local and expert GONHS is reported as being against the cull. Shouldn't they be listened to?

It is not correct to say that GONHS is against this particular cull. What GONHS has publicly stated, and I quote from the GONHS website is that "GONHS is not in favour of large culls, but the removal of entire splinter groups will be necessary on occasions". The culling of monkeys takes place infrequently and only as last resort after all other options have been exhausted. Before decision to cull is made, the Department of the Environment consults and seeks the advice of both GONHS and of the contracted Vet, and their advice is listened to so that decisions can be arrived at by consensus.

Is it true that the army used to shoot the apes to control the population?

It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the methods used by the MOD to control the Barbary Macaque population before this was handed over to the Gibraltar Government. This question should be directed to the MOD.

I will, however, say that it is known that culling has been used for many years and is recorded as early as 1888. The care and management of the Gibraltar monkeys was handed over by the MOD to the Gibraltar Government in 1990.

What method would be used if you go ahead with the cull?

I can assure you that culling takes place only in very controlled circumstances by vet who injects the lethal solution only after the monkey has been previously sedated. There is therefore no suffering caused to the animal.

Will you be taking steps to ensure this doesn't arise again; including enforcing the No Feeding rule,

and making sure visitors are fully aware of it?

The Department of the Environment is addressing the issue of bin stores and has an ongoing programme attempting to make all such stores "ape proof". As has already been demonstrated in some areas, when bins are kept closed and people do not feed the monkeys, these move away from the area. Better enforcement of the laws prohibiting unauthorised feeding will be examined and the humane contraception programme which was started some years ago will be continued.

However, our advice is that even then healthy population of Macaques can continue to splinter so that similar situation is almost certain to arise in future. Efforts will therefore continue to find possible suitable destinations to which these surplus animals can be exported in the future, but this is difficult to achieve and cannot be guaranteed.

How many Macaques would be left if the pack of 25 is killed?

According to the figures supplied by GONHS, the current population is about 206, which includes last year's

births. The removal of 25 "apes" would therefore leave the current population at about 181. There have been no births so far this year, but when these occur in the near future, the population will obviously once again increase to its original figure.

In brief, how would you sum up the government's position?

I would just like to stress once again that in the unique situation in Gibraltar where within its relatively small size, the "apes", essentially wild animals, roam freely. In such an environment, and following their natural behaviour patterns, it is unavoidable for splinter troops to occur and for these to occupy new locations, sometimes near inhabited areas.

In such situations, the welfare of our citizens has to be taken into account; and in that context, although the relocation of monkeys to the Upper Rock and exportation are always the first and preferred options, the third final and more drastic option then becomes unavoidable, and history shows that it has had to be regularly adopted for many years.

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