

So, You Wanna Buy a Chimp?

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By most estimates, there are about 500 chimpanzees living in private hands in North America. Around 100 of the lucky ones are living in bona fide sanctuaries, from Canada to Florida to Oregon. The remaining 400 chimpanzees live in human homes, or are unwitting / nonconsenting employees of roadside zoos, greeting card photographers, special events enterprises (with names like "Party Chimps" or "Rent-a-Chimp"), and entertainment promoters.

Where did these chimpanzees come from? In 1973, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) created an international treaty to protect endangered wildlife. Signatories agreed to ban or restrict importation and exportation of plants and animals listed in the treaty; all non-human primates are included on the lists. Shortly after the CITES treaty came into existence, the US Endangered Species Act (ESA) was passed. The intent of the ESA, enforced by the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), is to regulate trade in endangered and threatened species into this country, and control their movement between states. In 1976, chimpanzees were included on the "threatened" list. "Threatened" means that the species is "...likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range." [1] Just prior to their listing, one last wave of chimpanzees came to the US from Africa. According to the Chimpanzee Studbook records, those individuals were absorbed into the US. population - they went to zoos, to research, to entertainment. Many of them, not included in studbook records, became "pets." The designation of "threatened" entitled chimpanzees to a list of protections, including a prohibition on import or export, and their use in interstate commerce (which did not preclude them being donated). Permits could be gotten for scientific research, "enhancement of propagation or survival of the species," zoos, or educational purposes. [2]

Nearly a decade later, research on wild populations of chimpanzees uncovered a startling statistic - chimpanzee numbers had dropped from nearly 5 million to about 175,000 individuals. [3] The USFWS moved to upgrade chimpanzees to the endangered list. USFWS got thousands of letters in support of the upgrade; fewer than 10 people wrote to oppose the action. All but one of those letters was from biomedical researchers. [3,4] The biomedical lobby was powerful, and the NIH struck a deal with USFWS to "split-list" chimpanzees: wild populations would be upgraded to "endangered," but captive populations (those living in the US since 1976 or progeny of those individuals) would retain the status of "threatened." However, since 1978, chimpanzees have been included on a "Special Rules" list, exempting them from most protections afforded by the "threatened" designation. [5]

At present, the only federal protection for chimpanzees in the United States comes from the Animal Welfare Act, which is vague and nearly unenforceable at best.

What does the "special rule" mean for chimpanzees? It means that US chimpanzees can be used for invasive biomedical research, or euthanized when "need" prevails. It also means that chimpanzees can be sold at auction or through advertisements in publications like the Animal Finder's Guide. Infants have been known to sell for as much as \$40,000. It's the infants - cuddly and dependent - that tug at the heartstrings of humans wanting an addition to their family, to sell products on television or to entertain children at birthday parties.

In the early 1980s, biomedical research was desperate for chimpanzees to fight the war against AIDS. Chimpanzees who'd outgrown their usefulness as pets or circus performers were sent to the labs in droves. Within the next few years, the laboratories became suddenly and wildly successful in getting chimpanzees to reproduce. The labs with breeding colonies filled up, but the need for chimps in AIDS research never materialized, due to the unreliability of the "model." The success of the breeding resulted in today's surplus.

In contrast to the 1980s, the direction of today's trade in chimpanzees is threatening to flow the other way - out of the labs. Recently, an infant chimpanzee left The Coulston Foundation for a life in the entertainment cycle. [6] Lest you be tempted to think that a life in private hands is idyllic compared with the laboratory, consider the life of the young chimp, forced to perform and earn her keep. Photographs on one trainer's web site show young chimpanzees in unnatural poses, wearing clothing and grinning maniacally. [7] This lifestyle is a perversion of normal chimpanzee behavior, and can only be detrimental to their future well being. As "breeders," chimpanzees too old to perform will likely contribute to the growing numbers of chimpanzees in the trade.

A recent ad in the Animal Finder's Guide offers a 12 year old female chimpanzee for sale. The ad reads "...cycles regularly, very gentle, sweet personality, possible male available, would make excellent breeder, not a problem chimp..." Because of her age, the asking price is only \$11,000. [8] She'll be bought by an animal breeder, and will help to produce the next generation of actors.

What's the answer? The only real solution to end this barbarism is to grant chimpanzees legal personhood. But it's likely that a quick fix to begin to regulate the unchecked chimpanzee industry is to get the species off the Special Rules list. Couldn't hurt to give it a try.

References:

[1] Endangered Species Act of 1973. Section 3. Number 19.

[2] What You Need to Know...About the US. Endangered Species Act. [on-line] Available: <http://international.fws.gov/public/esa.pdf>.

[3] Fouts, R. (1997). Next of Kin. New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc.

[4] Blum, D. (1994) The Monkey Wars. New York: Oxford University Press.

[5] 50 CFR; Subchapter B; Part 17; Subpart D; Section 17.40(c)(1)(2).

[6] Michael Shinabery. (March 26, 2000). Animal trainers acquire young Coulston chimp. Alamogordo Daily News.

[7] Bob Dunn's Animal Services. [on-line] Available:
<http://www.animalservices.com/index.html>.

[8] Animal Finder's Guide. (March 15, 2000). p11.