

Apes in Media and Commercial Performances

Apes, including chimpanzees, gorillas, bonobos, orangutans, and gibbons, are intelligent, sensitive, long-lived and highly social animals. As humans' closest living relatives, they are fascinating, and ape infants are magnetically appealing. These attributes have made apes popular as performers in commercial entertainment and advertising programs. But this popularity and attractiveness masks the often cruel and dangerous practices commonly required to make apes compliant in such appearances.

This White Paper presents a brief summary of the justification for:

- Eliminating the use of apes as performers in commercial entertainment.
- Establishing standards to ensure that public presentations and interpretive programs portray apes respectfully and accurately represent the biology and conservation status of apes.

Rationale

1. An ape infant normally remains with its mother for several years in a group environment, learning social skills essential for development of normal adult behaviors. But apes destined to be performers or photographic props are typically removed from their mother shortly after birth and, thus, are denied opportunities for normal social and psychological development. This has several commercial advantages to an owner. Infants removed in this manner will be appealing and remain submissive for handling by humans for several years. Mothers whose infants are removed will resume sexual cycling and produce another profitable infant quickly.

But apes raised by humans in the absence of other members of their species will not normally acquire the skills to be socially and sexually competent as juveniles and adults. They may never readjust to life in a normal social group, and thus they are usually relegated to social and sexual isolation, which often leads to abnormal behaviors such as self-mutilation. For these reasons, it typically is not feasible to involve these individuals in conservation-based breeding programs.

2. Although endearing as infants, apes generally become physically powerful and unpredictable as they near adulthood. Their continued use as performers or props is potentially very dangerous to their handlers and audiences. Thus, handlers of ape performers often must use food deprivation, physical abuse, continuous tranquilization, or even electric shock to maintain control. Additionally, the animals may be modified to reduce their ability to cause harm, for example by removing their teeth. It should be noted that the apparent "smile" of a performing chimpanzee is actually a well-documented expression of fear.

3. Such physical and psychological effects are difficult to alleviate even if the ape is rescued and placed in a caring environment. More often however, when ape performers become too difficult to handle, they lose their commercial value and are sold to roadside menageries with inexperienced handlers and often inhumane conditions.
4. Dressing apes in human clothing, or training them to engage in unnatural (usually human) behaviors, while entertaining to some, inaccurately portrays their biology and conservation status. Since conservation efforts rely on informed public opinion, these practices serve to undermine communications vital to achieving conservation. The use of apes in advertisements and other commercial performances can lead people to conclude falsely that apes make good pets.
5. Because apes and humans are genetically so similar, both are susceptible to many of the same communicable diseases. Close and unprotected contact between performing apes, their handlers, and audiences can threaten all with viral, bacterial, and parasite infection.

In summary, the use of apes in media and commercial performances should be eliminated.

Approved by the Board of Directors – August 2008