Commentary

Who really wants to save the apes?

Let me begin with a simple fact. In spite of their physiological similarity and evolutionary proximity to people, *chimpanzees do not get AIDS*. People do, and an estimated 40 million of them have. Some detailed knowledge of the physiological mechanism by which the chimpanzee's body fights off the AIDS virus might be relevant to the health and welfare of those 40 million people.

Should we be preventing this research? Well, we are.

I support most emphatically the preservation of apes in the wild and their humane care in captivity, but I believe the spectacular success of the Great Ape Project over the last decade or so merits a closer look at the fruits of that success.

In demonizing all biomedical research on apes, regardless of the nature of the research or the quality of life of the apes, the Great Ape Project has not only helped shut down AIDS research on apes, but a broader range of biomedical research as well. A recent study claims that as many as 5000 gorillas have been lost to Ebola recently (Bermejo *et al* 2006) – far more than the number of gorillas in captivity, and suggesting a desperate need for biomedical research on gorilla Ebola.

By focusing on the 'rights' of captive apes, TGAP diffuses attention away from the problems faced by apes in the wild. The project assembled for that end, The Great Ape Survival Project (GRASP), makes no claims about rights, nor does it argue for a crude continuity or confusion between apes and people (Jolly 2005).

The great apes are threatened in the wild by three principal classes of factors: (i) the economic development of the human societies nearby, and consequent growth of human communities, with anthropogenic changes to the environment; (ii) hunting, for both food and trophies; and (iii) disease. Since the inception of the Great Ape Project, these threats to apes in the wild have not abated; if anything, they have intensified (Walsh *et al* 2003; Bermejo *et al* 2006; Galdikas 2007). Medical research is not a significant part of the problem the apes face; indeed, it is far more likely to be a part of the solution.

On the one hand, TGAP invokes the evolutionary proximity of apes and humans as evidence for their rights. On the other hand they acknowledge this as a "first step" towards the extension of rights to a broader and less tightly phylogenetically connected group. Is evolution actually relevant to the argument, then? If the goal is the extension of rights to distantly related species, then the argument for ape rights on the basis of their evolutionary proximity to us is nothing but a red herring. The evolutionary argument would seem to be at such cross purposes to the goal of "animal rights" that its sincerity can reasonably be doubted.

The same question can be raised about intellectual abilities of the apes, commonly raised by TGAP, and reiterated by Cavalieri (2006) as an argument for ape rights. And yet, in a moral world where geniuses and morons are entitled to the same rights, the relevance of information on the apes' intellectual abilities is actually quite far from clear. We might be very suspicious, for example, of the suggestion to base an allotment of rights on the results of IQ tests. Moreover, the meaning of much of this work is highly contested (e.g., Povinelli 2000; Marks 2002; Wynne 2005). Further, the more compelling the case for ape rights on the basis of their intelligence, the reciprocally weaker would seem to be the case for rights for the less intellectually endowed members of the Class Mammalia. But thank goodness we have these studies of captive chimpanzees, to be able to try to understand their cognitive abilities at all!

To condemn biomedical research that could save both people and apes, without qualification, obviously requires some considerable intellectual energies, and its result is the troubling mix of biophilia and misanthropy that constitutes the Great Ape Project.

There are about 1400 chimpanzees in a handful of captive Federal research facilities in the US. They live in stimulating social environments and are tended by sensitive, compassionate, and knowledgeable

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caretakers. Their well-being is constantly monitored by veterinarians and primatologists; they have better health care than most American people. These apes are in no way being tortured, imprisoned, or murdered; the medical research they undergo is actually far more similar to your annual checkup than it is to anything at Auschwitz.

The major deficits in the lives of these chimpanzees are coming paradoxically from the activities of the Great Ape Project. Partly as a result of the agitation of animal rights activists, there has been a moratorium imposed since 1997 on the breeding of chimpanzees in the US research facilities. Here is a paradox, then: The Great Ape Project's work has helped to make it impossible at present for these chimpanzees to enjoy the pleasures of parenthood. It also means that the population of chimpanzees in these facilities is aging, and is not being replenished (Preuss 2006).

Let us now combine these three ideas. (i) The destruction of ape populations has accelerated, not diminished, in the decade or so since the inception of the Great Ape Project. (ii) Biomedical research that could help people and apes is being retarded by the Great Ape Project. (iii) Chimps in biomedical facilities are not being permitted to breed.

Thus, the darker side of the ape rights movement: *the Great Ape Project may very likely be the ultimate cause of the extinction of the great apes.*

Frans deWaal has argued that primate welfare or obligations is a better way to frame the discussion of the future of primate research (deWaal 2006; Demers *et al* 2006). I also find that to be a far more sensible cause than talking about 'rights'. I am for the preservation of all primates in the wild; their humane and sensitive treatment in captivity; and ethical biomedical research on people and apes. Unfortunately, that seems to put me in opposition to the Great Ape Project.

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