

Behind the Scenes: The Shocking Lives of Chimpanzees in Entertainment

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In a room barely larger than a coffin, an infant wails for his mother. His tiny palm moves instinctively to his face, shielding himself from the onslaught of blows from a large hand curled into a fist. Both hands are so similar, displaying five slender fingers and a leathery palm; however, one is clenched with domination while the other is helpless and weak. The plight of this infant, merely a year old is not unusual. The abuse of child chimpanzees is ubiquitous in the glorified entertainment industry. Although the horrific maltreatment of chimpanzees is damaging to the physical and emotional health of these intelligent animals, with the spread of awareness and support of reputable sanctuaries, the damage inflicted by the entertainment industry can be ameliorated.

The widespread popularity of chimpanzees has created a large market for chimpanzee movies through classics such as *Tarzan* and *the Planet of the Apes* which have emphasized the lovable human characteristics of chimpanzees, depicting these animals as cute and cuddly creatures. In order to satiate the public's thirst for chimpanzee movies, companies such as Amazing Animal Actors have come into existence, capturing and training young chimpanzees. These primates are often torn away from their mothers days after birth and raised in a foreign place, starved of contact with other chimpanzees. In addition to the anxiety and psychological damage of being removed prematurely from their mother, these baby chimpanzees are brought into confined areas without appropriate nutrition and medical care. As the chimpanzees age into curious and playful children, they grow more difficult to control and dominate. As a result, trainers often "rely heavily on physical abuse and fear to ensure constant attention and

compliance” (Day). Chimpanzees have been bludgeoned by hammers or lead pipes, hit, kicked, and given electric shocks by trainers in order to instill subservience in the animals and establish dominance. During their training, young chimpanzees are forced to “learn how NOT to act like normal chimpanzees” and suffer heavy punishments for disobedience or aggression (Baekler). As a result, the “younger chimpanzees [are] timid and hesitant with their trainers and appear traumatized and fearful” (Baekler). In fact, one of the first tricks that a chimpanzee must master is the smile, a position that “exists in natural chimpanzee behavior but usually expresses extreme fear” (Day).

Because of the everyday presence of chimpanzees in media and entertainment, many people believe that chimpanzees are not threatened in the wild. However, the number of individuals in the wild has dwindled significantly and only 6 out of the 25 countries that house chimpanzees in the wild have successful breeding populations. The portrayal of chimpanzees as loveable pets in the entertainment industry has led to a spike in the number of baby chimpanzees captured illegally as pets. In addition to illegal poaching and habitat destruction, the capture of wild chimpanzees has decimated the chimpanzee population (Why are Chimpanzees Endangered?).

Although the American Humane Association provides regulations and restrictions regarding animal training, these rules are insufficient and inhumane treatment prevails. Blockbusters such as Clint Eastwood’s *In Every Which Way but Loose* and Matthew Broderick’s *Project X* produced large revenues at the cost of animal lives. In the film *In Every Which Way but Loose*, the starring primate, named Buddha, was bludgeoned to death with an axe handle after being caught stealing a doughnut. An alarming amount of abuse was documented during the production of *Project X* whose plot was ironically centered on chimpanzee protection, and

eighteen felony accounts were filed (Ross). Chimpanzee abuse has also been recorded in the production of popular television shows including the Addams Family, Lizzie McGuire, ER, and Seinfeld (Chimp CARE). In addition, the abuse of animals in theme parks and circuses also sabotages the physical and emotional health of chimpanzees. These animals often perform tricks at events such as birthday parties, fairs, and festivals. Living conditions are often cramped and filthy, and many chimpanzees develop aggressive or uncontrollable behavior. (Chimps Inc.)

After enduring seven or eight torturous years, the once small and relatively complacent chimpanzees grow out of control. Chimpanzee actors often develop aggressive or abnormal behavior from years of acting in unnatural ways, and as a result, reputable zoos and conservation organizations refuse to accept these animals (Day). At this point most chimpanzees are abandoned in notoriously deplorable “roadside zoos” and circuses, slaughtered, or sold to biomedical research corporations (Chimpanzees in Entertainment: The Facts). However, a small percentage of lucky show chimpanzees are accepted into zoos or sanctuaries where they receive rehabilitation and care. Despite the patience and dedication of rehabilitators, these animals rarely make a full recovery because “like human children, ape children learn by watching adults and imitating their behavior...and individuals who have no chance to grow up in a normal group ... fail to learn the nuances of chimp etiquette” (Goodall). After being taught to eat, walk, dress, act, and think like humans, some animals “forget they are not human resulting in psychological and physical stress throughout the sixty year long lifespan of the chimpanzee” (Day).

Although rehabilitation is a demanding and difficult task, the efforts of accredited zoos and sanctuaries help make a large impact on the welfare of many chimpanzees. Through close contact with other chimpanzees and proper nutrition and exercise, some chimpanzees learn to overcome the trauma of their past and live the rest of their lives happily (Day). Many rescue

organizations such as Chimps Inc. and Chimpanzee Rescue Northwest help spread awareness about the endangered status of chimpanzees in the wild.

Despite the many individuals and organizations that dedicate themselves to the protection of these emotionally disturbed primates, rehabilitation facilities are expensive to maintain. Public support and awareness will help these organizations reach out to more animals. The cost of food, medical care, maintaining adequate living conditions, toys, education facilities, and administrative needs can amount to several thousand dollars a month (Chimpanzees in Entertainment: The Facts). Donations to organizations such as Chimps Inc., the Jane Goodall Institute, and the Chimpanzee Sanctuary Northwest help provide the resources necessary to nurture these creatures and educate the public. In addition to monetary donations, a gift of time or support in a campaign can be invaluable to the efforts of these organizations (Chimpanzees in Entertainment: The Facts). By joining the Jane Goodall Institute's "No Great Apes in Entertainment" pledge, one can help by sending letters to large corporations discouraging the use of chimpanzees in advertising as well as help spread awareness about the horrors of chimpanzee abuse. By signing the pledge, people can "take action against great apes in entertainment [which] help[s] keep them where they belong...in the wild (Goodall). Volunteering time and skills to organizations such as Chimps Inc. helps provide individualized care, beautify the chimpanzees' living areas, help spread awareness, and foster a bond between humans and primates (Day).

As teenagers, we are inclined to feel helpless about our influence in the world. Hovering on the brink of adulthood, we are not able to vote, but our voices and opinions can still be heard. The multibillion dollar entertainment industry invests millions of dollars in the production of films targeted towards young adults and children. Recently, my friends and I refused to see a movie that used live animal actors after learning about the harrowing abuse to which these

animals are subject. This simple act, if followed by many people, may have significant repercussions, decreasing the demand for films that come at the high cost of suffering. Also, encouraging large corporations to eliminate the use of chimpanzees in advertising will decrease the number of chimpanzees illegally captured from the wild (Goodall). Support of organizations that have already taken this pledge such as Ad Council, Samsung, and Levi Strauss & Co. helps reinforce the decision and encourages other companies to follow suit (Chimp CARE).

Perhaps the easiest way to make an impact is to spread awareness. My sister and I have already taken the first step by using our birthday money to start a not for profit foundation that benefits animals and children. We are in the process of creating a website that sheds light on issues including chimpanzee exploitation. Our long term plan is to reach out to organizations such as Chimps Inc. which are helping chimpanzees and raise funds and awareness for the specific needs of these organizations. Through spreading awareness, we have found a way to channel our passion for helping animals in a productive and powerful way.

The thought that “these trained performers suffer greatly for our amusement” is both repulsive and disturbing (Goodall). As our closest relatives, chimpanzees have ten fingers and belly buttons. They see. They think. They feel. They hurt. The unacceptable treatment of these intelligent creatures casts a dark shadow on the conscience of humanity. Fortunately, by making responsible entertainment choices and supporting the efforts of those who are working towards bettering the lives of abused chimpanzees, the scope of this cruelty can be reduced.

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