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Death of language-competent chimpanzee Washoe a loss to scientific community

Work with Washoe blazed a trail for Great Ape Trust scientists

Des Moines, Iowa – November 1, 2007 – The chimpanzee Washoe, the first great ape to acquire human language, died of natural causes on Tuesday, Oct. 30, at Central Washington University's Chimpanzee-Human Communication Institute in Ellensburg. Washoe, born in the wild in Africa and captured as an infant, was believed to be 42.

Scientists at Great Ape Trust of Iowa, a scientific research facility dedicated to understanding the origins and future of culture, language, tools and intelligence, joined scientists around the globe in mourning the loss of Washoe, the first ape to break the species barrier in human-chimpanzee relations. In their work with Washoe, Drs. Beatrix and Allen Gardner, both psychologists, made the first major breakthrough in understanding the limits of the chimpanzee mind and the influence of language in 1966. Theirs was the first ape language project breaking from the tradition of trying to get apes to speak.

Among the scientists collaborating with Washoe was [Dr. Sue Savage-Rumbaugh](#) a scientist at Great Ape Trust. Her early work with Washoe led to subsequent work with chimpanzees [Sherman and Austin](#) and, later, [Kanzi](#) and [Panbanisha](#), bonobos now

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living at The Trust. Rumbaugh and [William M. Fields](#), director of bonobo research at Great Ape Trust, are the only scientists in the world conducting language research with bonobos.

[Dr. Duane Rumbaugh](#), scientist *emeritus* at Great Ape Trust, said the research with Washoe helped scientists better understand how apes think, how they conceptualize and how they become rational beings.

“It was absolutely frontier-breaking work,” Rumbaugh told *The New York Times* for an article on Washoe’s death in Thursday’s edition. Rumbaugh built on the earlier work with Washoe when he initiated the [LANA \(LANguage Analogue\) Project](#) with a female chimpanzee appropriately named Lana in 1971. For that project, he developed a computer-monitored keyboard with keys that could be moved around to make the chimpanzee Lana attend to the word-lexigrams’ patterns and not simply their positions on the keyboard.

From that point forward, there has been a steady flow of keyboard development, including the lexigrams developed by Savage-Rumbaugh that serve as the primary communicative interface for ape language research with bonobos now living at Great Ape Trust.

He said Washoe helped scientists step across a language barrier believed to be impermeable – the line separating humans from animals. “Washoe put her toes across the line,” Rumbaugh said, “then boldly led the way for other apes to follow.”

Those apes included Lana, who became skillful and clever in her ability to use word lexigrams to converse, ask questions and convey other thoughts.

“Lana’s inaugural computer-monitored keyboard allowed other chimpanzees – Sherman and Austin and Panzee, and then the bonobos Kanzi and Panbanisha and others – to wend their ways into the language domain and to teach us, in turn, about how language skills are mastered,” Rumbaugh said. “Washoe led the charge-of-the-apes to the conclusions that, yes, apes are very capable of several basic language skills. They can master word-lexigrams and demonstrate that their appropriate usages are based on meaning, not habit. Washoe led us into concern about whether other-than-humans can think. Her answer was, and remains, ‘Yes!’”

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[Dr. Carl Halgren](#), a professor of psychology at Indianola-based Simpson College who is helping to develop a partnership between that institution and Great Ape Trust, shared fond memories of meeting Washoe in 1973 when he and his wife visited the Institute for Primate Research in Norman, Okla. Washoe lived there for a time and collaborated in research led by Roger Fouts, a behavioral psychologist and primatologist who is co-director of the research center in Washington where Washoe spent her final years. As a graduate student, Fouts had worked extensively with the Gardners in their research with Washoe.

“Several other chimps and Washoe were outside on their island when Roger Fouts communicated with Washoe across the moat that separated us,” Halgren recalled. “We were intrigued that he could communicate with Washoe through the use of American Sign Language, which my wife had studied a bit. I knew nothing of ASL, but when Roger Fouts directed Washoe’s attention to our baby daughter Jessica and asked what she was, there was no mistaking her signing back ‘baby’ when she cradled her arms and rocked them as we do to indicate ‘baby.’”

The experience was touching and intriguing on a personal level, Halgren said, but also important scientifically. “Washoe’s importance in the study of ape language capabilities cannot be overestimated,” he said.

Washoe was born in Africa in September 1965, captured as an infant when her mother was killed by hunters, and taken to market and sold to a dealer, according to the Friends of Washoe [Web site](#). She was brought to the United States by the Air Force for space research and was later adopted at about 10 months old by the Gardners. They named her Washoe after the county that is home to the University of Nevada at Reno, where their language research program was located.

The young female chimpanzee was reared in a home-like environment and was exposed to American Sign Language rather than spoken language. Those interacting with Washoe were forbidden to speak in her presence and were instead asked to use ASL.

The Gardners assumed the ability to produce a sign implied the ability to comprehend what the signers intended. When she died, she had a vocabulary of about 250 words.

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Washoe and two other chimpanzees from the Gardners' language study moved to the Institute for Primate Research in Norman, Okla., in 1971 with Fouts and his wife, Deborah, also a behavioral psychologist. In 1980, the chimpanzees moved with the Foutses to Ellensburg, where Roger Fouts had joined the faculty at Central Washington University. Washoe remained there until her death on Tuesday.

GREAT APE TRUST BACKGROUND

Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a scientific research facility in southeast Des Moines dedicated to understanding the origins and future of culture, language, tools and intelligence. When completed, Great Ape Trust will be the largest great ape facility in North America and one of the first worldwide to include all four types of great ape – bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans – for noninvasive interdisciplinary studies of their cognitive and communicative capabilities.

Great Ape Trust is dedicated to providing sanctuary and an honorable life for great apes, studying the intelligence of great apes, advancing conservation of great apes and providing unique educational experiences about great apes. Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a 501(c) 3 not-for-profit organization and is certified by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). To learn more about Great Ape Trust of Iowa, go to www.GreatApeTrust.org.

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Insights Through Collaborations with Apes