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Great Ape Trust, sanctuary in Florida share expertise to better conditions for apes

*Patti Ragan's Center for Great Apes provides a permanent home
for orangutans and chimpanzees used in the entertainment business*

Des Moines, Iowa – December 19, 2007 – Patti Ragan has created hope from situations that would crush the hearts of those who regard great apes as sentient beings much like human beings. Executive Director of the Center for Great Apes at Wauchula, Fla., Ragan and her staff shelter 43 chimpanzees and orangutans, many of whom, prior to her intervention, were consigned to desolate lives in small cages that restricted their arboreal tendencies.

Many of the apes' faces are familiar. For example, Sammy, a magnificent looking 18-year-old orangutan, starred in several movies – *The Flintstones*, *Planet of the Apes* and his most famous film, *Dunston Checks In* – before he became too strong and dangerous to work and was retired to a small cage at the trainer's compound. The chimpanzee Ellie was one of the original apes used in CareerBuilder.com television commercials until the practice of using apes in such spots was suspended and the chimps were permanently retired.

Other apes are not so well known, but have backgrounds that [Dr. Rob Shumaker](#), director of orangutan research at Great Ape Trust, says are inconsistent with generally accepted standards of ape welfare. Shumaker and other Great Ape Trust officials recently visited Florida to tour the sprawling, 120-acre wooded compound with a

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3,000-foot above-ground tunnel system that offers permanent sanctuary and lifetime care for orangutans and chimpanzees from the entertainment industry, roadside zoos and the pet trade. Great Ape Trust has joined a growing community in [opposition](#) to the private ownership of great apes, and Shumaker has a strong personal commitment to ending the practice.

“What’s shocking to me is the absolutely dismal conditions some of these apes have lived in for years, in some cases in solitary confinement, something we reserve for the worst human criminal, yet apes that are innocent are being kept that way for years,” Shumaker said.

Often, privately-owned apes are hidden away in basements and garages in cages so small they can’t turn around or stand upright, accommodations that Shumaker says are sharply at odds with “what we know about their mental and social abilities and what they need – freedom of movement, the ability to socialize, good nutrition.”

The chimpanzee Butch, for example, was captured in Africa in 1973; consigned to live in a cage so small that he never developed fully and often scooted wherever he needed to go, and was forced to do unnatural circus tricks such as riding a motorcycle. He has lived at the Center for Great Apes since 2000, but he still checks over his shoulder frequently to see if anyone is coming upon him. Louie, 12, was not yet a year old and should have remained with his mother several more years when he was sold to work in an animal show at the Universal Studios, where he was kept backstage and trained to walk upright, which is awkward and unnatural. After years of being made to walk almost exclusively this way, he continues the abnormal form of locomotion and looks peculiar as he moves about his habitat. Born in Africa in about 1974, Toddy was captured in the wild and sold as a pet to a family in Florida. When she began having seizures as an infant, veterinarians discovered bullet fragments lodged in her brain, presumably as a result of her capture. She was shuffled from one place to the next until she finally ended up at a breeding farm, where she had four or five infants whom she was not allowed to raise. Denyse, at 38 one of the oldest chimpanzees at the Center for Great Apes, was kept as a pet for 35 years and had never met another chimpanzee until she arrived at the Florida facility about two years ago.

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There are dozens of such stories at Ragan's Center for Great Apes, which Shumaker says sets one of the highest standards in the world for the care of great apes in captivity. He said the visit to the Florida sanctuary was a tremendous opportunity for Great Ape Trust staff to see best practices from one of the leaders in the field of great ape rescue. The delegation also included Andy Antilla, a senior orangutan caretaker; Brian Eldridge, buildings and grounds superintendent and his assistant, Allen Schroeder, fabrications manager; and Great Ape Trust founder and chairman Ted Townsend.

With more than one-half mile of above-ground tunnel connected to large, 34-foot-high domed habitats, which include night houses with ropes, swings and hammocks, the Center for Great Apes is "without question one of the best ape facilities in the United States," Shumaker said. "It was a great opportunity to learn about some of those innovative and revolutionary designs."

Eldridge and Schroeder visited with the Center for Great Apes maintenance personnel to determine the feasibility of replicating on some scale the 3,000-foot above-ground tunnel system that allows the orangutans and chimpanzees to explore the tropical forest below them. They had fabricated a similar galvanized tunnel that will give Great Ape Trust resident orangutans [Azy](#), [Knobi](#) and [Allie](#) access to a nearly 4-acre outdoor yard currently under construction. When it is completed and officially opened to orangutans next spring, it will be one of the largest outdoor facilities anywhere for orangutans in captivity. The outdoor yard will provide enrichment opportunities for the orangutans but, equally important, make it possible for the Great Ape Trust orangutan researchers to collect and analyze data on locomotion, memory and other skills in a natural habitat.

Such data will enhance the scientific research at Great Ape Trust on orangutan cognition, language and memory, Shumaker said. In addition to the large amount of space currently available in the orangutan enclosure, "we want to construct something that allows them to travel significantly and have a much more normal lifestyle," he said.

"In the wild, every primate travels," he said. "They have to learn spatial and navigation skills, and a whole list of other important skills: short- and long-term memory, foraging, social interaction, and vocalization and other forms of interaction."

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“Travel is one of the things for apes in the wild that really has a strong influence on their mental abilities and cognitive skills, and we need to find ways in captivity to provide opportunities for travel,” he said.

Ragan founded Center for Great Apes in 1993 after selling an office-staffing business she had operated in Miami for 16 years. Prior to that, her interest in working with animals led her to a docent position at the Miami Metro Zoo, where she was introduced to EarthWatch Institute, an international not-for-profit organization that supports conservation research expeditions and education by enabling paying volunteers, educators, corporate fellows, and others to work alongside scientists, collecting valuable research data and promoting the understanding and action needed for a sustainable environment. Through EarthWatch in 1984, she worked for three months as a volunteer in Borneo, one of two places in the world where orangutans remain in the wild.

Those experiences crystallized for Ragan the plight of great apes used in the entertainment industry and the dismal future that awaits them when they become too strong for their handlers to manage. Zoos often don’t want them because they have been raised by humans and have not been exposed to normal ape behavior.

“I didn’t see any future for them,” Ragan said. “People need to be educated to understand that when they enjoy a movie, the apes may be so cute, but it usually means a lifetime of misery for them.”

Ragan said the problem isn’t with the trainers of great apes used in entertainment, who supply a demand that must be curbed for the practice to end. “You can put all the trainers out of business, but as long as writers, producers, and advertising agencies are requesting them, someone else is going to fill that need,” she said. “We need to make this politically incorrect – just like sexual harassment in the workplace was 25 years ago.”

Ragan founded Center for Great Apes, a non-profit organization that depends on grants and gifts for funding, originally on 15 acres of land for a few animals needing a home. The facility is at full capacity now, and there are at least 20 more chimpanzees in immediate need of a permanent home. “Few sanctuaries have room for them,” Ragan said of the nine chimpanzee sanctuaries in the United States with a rescue mission.

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“That happens here, too,” said Shumaker, who has received calls asking if Great Ape Trust could provide lifetime homes for about 75 privately-owned chimpanzees since construction of the facility began in 2003.

“It’s a question of resources,” he said, “not commitment.”

Rescuing apes and giving them a life of dignity is expensive, costing Ragan at least \$14,000 per ape per year, or more than \$600,000 annually in direct ape care alone. The physical strength of the great apes is another challenge, and “because of this, you have to build much stronger than for almost any other animal,” she said.

“We are taking them out of situations where there was not a future and putting them in the best environment we can afford,” Ragan said. “They have lots of space to climb and run around, for same-species interaction and to learn to live socially with their own species, and they have security for the future.

“That’s the challenge, and it’s so different than with any other animals,” she continued. “They have a strong, sturdy, safe environment and all kinds of care and enrichment. We could spend less money, but that would make us no different than the roadside zoos and breeder compounds.”

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