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## Ape language pioneer Savage-Rumbaugh receives honorary Ph.D. from alma mater

Des Moines, Iowa – May 22, 2008 – Dr. Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, *Scientist With Special Standing* at Great Ape Trust of Iowa and a pioneer in the field of ape language and cognition studies, recently received the eighth honorary doctor of science degree conferred in the 103-year history of her alma mater, Missouri State University at Springfield.

Savage-Rumbaugh, an internationally known primatologist and experimental psychologist who demonstrated that through early rearing experiences, bonobos and chimpanzees can comprehend spoken English and simple grammar, is a native of Springfield. She said the honorary degree from Missouri State University – Southwest Missouri State College when she received her bachelor of arts in psychology degree in 1970 – is especially significant because it was there that she was recommended for and received a prestigious Woodrow Wilson Fellowship that would change not only her research focus, but her life as well.

Eager to study under the influential behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner, Savage-Rumbaugh applied to and was accepted to Harvard University, but some administrative changes in the fellowship put Harvard out of her reach financially. She was looking at other institutions that would allow her to expand her research interest in cognitive

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development in children when she discovered the “Chimp Farm,” or the Institute for Primate Studies, at the University of Oklahoma, where research was conducted to refute the notion that the acquisition of language is unique to humans.

“At the time, no one thought any creature had any symbolic capacity,” Savage-Rumbaugh said. “The best results come from studying a phenomenon from all different angles, and this changed my research focus to include cognitive development in non-human primates. Experimental psychology was focused on pigeons and rats at the time, and it was not going to take us where we needed to go. We needed to include great apes.”

In her remarks to graduates of her alma mater, Savage-Rumbaugh said that when she received her bachelor’s degree from MSU 38 years ago, she entered a field – the study of whether great apes can acquire language – that didn’t exist until 1979 and has become mired in debate and has yet to make its full impact felt. The inquiry matters for many reasons, Savage-Rumbaugh said, and importantly, has forced humans to contemplate the true meaning of language.

“Was it just words and grammar, or fundamentally something much deeper?” she said. “Did we require the capacity to reason in order to have language? Or in acquiring language from our culture, did we also acquire the capacity to reason, to think and finally to assume moral responsibility for all of our actions? Did language enable us to become cultural beings, or was it culture itself that enabled us to acquire language?”

Ape language studies also have exposed what may be flaws in the distinction between humans and animals, she said. The natural world is divided into four categories – man, animal, vegetable and mineral – but the more scientists learn about and understand great apes, “the more we find our old categories falling into ruin.”

“We now know that we share with some apes nearly 99 percent of our DNA,” she said. “We are, in fact, really a genera of five great apes, related in the following order from most distant to nearest: orangutan, gorilla, chimpanzee, bonobo and human being. Even more puzzling to us is this fact: Chimpanzees and bonobos are more closely related to us than they are to the other great apes, the gorilla and the orangutan.

“Thus, if genes matter – and they do – then how do we justify the categories ‘man’ and ‘animal’ when there are two species of animals living on the planet that are more

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like us than they are like any other living animal?” she said. “Such scientific findings have thrown our old simplistic categories into a state of confusion. The field of ape language presses that confusion further and harder still.”

Savage-Rumbaugh received her master of science and doctorate degrees from the University of Oklahoma, the latter in 1975, and went on to a storied career. As the first scientist to conduct language studies with bonobos, her work has redefined the boundaries between human and nonhuman primates, and has contributed greatly to the understanding of how humans think, learn and use language.

The honorary degree from Missouri State University was the second conferred upon Savage-Rumbaugh in recognition of her stellar career. The University of Chicago also conferred an honorary doctor of science degree in 1997 in recognition of the contributions of her research with bonobos and chimpanzees to education, conservation and the formulation of principles that have been applied to language-challenged children and young adults.

She joined Great Ape Trust in 2005 after a 30-year association with Georgia State University’s Language Research Center, where her initial research involved a collaboration with two young chimpanzees, Sherman and Austin, which laid the experimental and philosophical foundation for her future work with bonobos, including Kanzi and his half sister, Panbanisha.

Savage-Rumbaugh retired as director of bonobo research in 2007 and assumed the position of *Scientist with Special Standing*, a designation Great Ape Trust founder Ted Townsend said recognizes her extraordinary contributions to ape language research. In her new role, she continues to do research with the bonobos at Great Ape Trust while expanding her research into other areas.

## **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 –

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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](http://www.GreatApeTrust.org).

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## Insights Through Collaborations with Apes