

A Place for Apes

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The Center for Great Apes gives sanctuary to our simian cousins.

By Tarre Beach

Orangutans and chimpanzees are beautiful creatures. From their expressive faces to how they tenderly groom each other. They are so much like humans it's easy to see why our genomes are up to 97.5 percent the same. But our simian cousins were never meant to live like us or be kept in small cages as pets or entertainment. They were meant to forage, lounge and play together in the jungle or rainforest.

Patti Ragan, with help from many ape angels, allows 44 apes to do just that right here in Central Florida. Ragan, who was first introduced to the gentle nature of apes by being part of a rehabilitation project for wild orangutans in Borneo, founded the Center for Great Apes in rural Wauchula, Fla. The main goal of the non-profit sanctuary is to give orangutans and chimpanzees that were once performers or private pets a place to retire. "It's amazing how the apes respond when they get here. They relax a little. You can see it in their eyes and their whole demeanor," Ragan says. Just an hour and a half outside of Orlando, the center sits on 120 acres and uses much of Central Florida's natural landscape to replicate the only places orangutans and chimpanzees are found in the wild: Borneo, Sumatra and Western and Central Africa. According to Ragan, the center is sustained entirely by donations from kind hearts and does not receive any type of state or federal funding. "We are not a visitor destination, which can make it difficult to maintain the donations we need to do this important work." As a sanctuary rather than a public attraction or zoo, the center's sixteen staff and countless volunteers work hard to stay somewhat hidden and allow the residents to live out their lives undisturbed.

And these apes deserve some peace and quiet. The unbelievable stories of some of the center's apes can be hard to hear. Mari, who's been at the center for nine years, is a loving Sumatran orangutan that spent her first 20 years in a research facility. Although she lost both her arms in an accident when she was an infant, she is now part of a family of other orangutans that accept her despite her disability. Apes can live to be up to 50 years old in captivity. Many trainers or private pet owners no longer want to care for an ape when they are older. That's what happened to Marco, who is now 48 years old. He worked in the circus and was kept alone in a small cage for 35 years at his trainer's home. He had not even seen another chimp until he came to the center in 2005. Now Marco and his center buddy Butch, a wild caught chimp who had his canine

teeth removed by his trainer, are inseparable.

And then there's Geri who was reunited with her son Jam after he was taken from her when he was an infant. Breeders often take infants from their mothers to train them. In the wild, apes routinely spend up to five years nursing and up to eight years living in their mother's nests. The loss of their children is very difficult for mother apes.

The work the center does may not seem very glamorous, but it is making a difference. Apes live in large three-story tall domed enclosures that are connected to other enclosures via a mile of open-air tunnels that allow them to wonder through the forest in a controlled, safe way. This unique shelter system has had a profound effect on many of the residents. The enclosures are open to the elements, but each of the twelve pods has a shelter where apes can get out of the weather. Linus, however, actually comes out of his shelter when it rains. Before coming to the center he spent more than a decade in a dark garage. Having rain fall on his face is a great treat to this orangutan.

It costs about \$16,000 to \$17,000 a year to feed and care for each ape. Enclosures cost about \$75,000. The center held a gala in Apopka on April 24 and Ragan hopes to use money raised from the event to start another enclosure. While visits of the sanctuary don't happen often, center members are invited once a year to tour the center. Membership dues help care for the apes that already call the center home as well as educate and lobby for laws that keep apes out of the entertainment industry or kept as private pets. "Apes are meant to live in the wild with each other. We would love it if sanctuaries like ours didn't have to exist." Gratefully, the Center for Great Apes does.

All support comes from individual memberships, private donor support, and grants from animal welfare foundations. The Center does not receive any type of government funding. There is an ongoing need for lifetime care for primates in desperate situations and the Center is therefore in a continuous mode of fundraising and construction of additional indoor and outdoor housing.

To find out how to become a member, volunteer with the center, or adopt a chimpanzee or orangutan call 863.767.8903 or visit www.centerforgreatapes.com.