

Ape Crusaders - Wauchula Center a Sanctuary for Chimpanzees, Orangutans

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You might recall the series of commercials for CareerBuilder.com that began running during the 2004 Super Bowl. Set in an office, they showed chimpanzees in shirts and ties cavorting unproductively, swigging Champagne, smoking cigars, listening to Quiet Riot and generally exasperating their sole human co-worker.

The commercials were a success for almost all involved, yielding money for the chimps' trainers, the human actor and the production crew, earning an award for the advertiser and generating buzz for CareerBuilder.com.

The ads, though, didn't do much for their simian stars, including a chimp named Kodua. The ape's acting career soon ended when the trainer left the business, and Kodua might have wound up in a roadside display or even in a biomedical research facility were it not for a sanctuary in Hardee County.

Kodua is one of 42 chimpanzees and orangutans at The Center for Great Apes, something of a simian actors retirement home hidden amid citrus groves several miles outside Wauchula. The population also includes Sammy, an orangutan who played the title role in the movie "Dunston Checks In," fellow orangutan Geri ("The Flintstones") and a chimp called Mowgli ("The Shaggy Dog").

Apes used in entertainment become uncontrollably strong by age 6 or so, yet the apes can live 50 years or more.

"Nobody takes responsibility for the future of these animals," center director Patti Ragan said, "and that's why they end up in roadside zoos and backyard cages. ... Kodua is a million-dollar commitment for me."

In addition to the apes from the entertainment industry, some at the sanctuary were rescued from small tourist attractions. Others had been kept as pets, often in deplorable conditions, and a few came from scientific research facilities.

Ragan said it costs nearly \$15,000 a year to provide for each ape, and the 120-acre center, which is closed to the public, relies on donations to meet its annual budget of about \$900,000.

The 28 chimps and 14 orangutans live in spacious, high-topped wire enclosures furnished with swings and climbing structures. It's no substitute for the wild, but Sammy the orangutan appeared contented enough on a recent morning as he thrust his narrow-eyed, cinnamon-bearded

face against the wires of his enclosure and gazed quizzically at a visitor. Taking air into his throat pouch, Sammy emitted a guttural rumbling, which Ragan explained is similar to a cat's purring.

IT BEGAN WITH PONGO

The sanctuary had a long genesis. Ragan, a former teacher and business owner, became interested in apes while working as a docent at Miami MetroZoo in the 1980s. She later began volunteering at a small tourist attraction in Miami that held an infant orangutan named Pongo.

The ape contracted meningitis, preventing his owner from selling him to a circus trainer, as planned, and Ragan took over Pongo's care and eventually adopted him. After selling her business, she created a nonprofit organization while caring for Pongo and a few other apes at the tourist attraction. She began looking for a place to establish a sanctuary, and in 1997 she bought two houses and 15 acres in Hardee County, bringing five apes with her, including Pongo, now 18.

The sanctuary has expanded to 120 acres and now has 11 large enclosures, several smaller ones and 10 houses to which the apes can retreat at night and during bad weather. Three-quarters of a mile of elevated walkways allow the apes to roam, though the center's staff is careful to limit contact that could lead to violent encounters.

The center, licensed and inspected by federal and state agencies, has 15 employees, seven of whom live on the grounds. The apes' meals are prepared in an immaculate kitchen, which on a recent morning held large bins of apples, bananas, lettuce, oranges, kiwi fruit and sweet potatoes. A small clinic allows an outside veterinarian to provide routine and emergency medical care.

A barn from 1911, used for storage, and a two-seat outhouse add rustic charm, and dozens of pine tree stumps testify to the effects of the 2004 hurricanes.

LIVES OF DEPRIVATION

Many of the center's apes have unhappy histories.

Toddy, a 24-year-old chimp, had been a family pet and resided in a small exhibit and a breeding facility. Ragan said the chimp has bullet fragments in her head, probably the result of her mother's killing when the ape was seized in Africa.

Linus, an orangutan, arrived after 10 years in a garage, his hair encrusted with several pounds of filth. Ragan said the first time it rained after his arrival, Linus remained outside while the other apes took cover, and he thrust his face upward.

"This is a rainforest animal that had never felt rain before," Ragan said. "He still goes out when it rains."

Mickey, a chimp, spent 20 years in a small cage as a family pet and arrived obese and emotionally stunted. Ragan said it took two years before he could tolerate being with other chimps.

In the wild, chimpanzees nurse for about four years and remain with their mothers for eight years. Ragan said chimps born in breeding facilities or harvested from the wild are ripped from their dams soon after birth, and those not reared by their mothers don't learn how to interact with other chimps.

"We can't just put these chimps into this enclosure," Ragan said. "It takes a lot of training."

Ragan said Kodua, the chimp who photocopied her bare bottom in a CareerBuilder commercial, was seized from her mother within weeks of birth. When Kodua came to Ragan's center, she was adopted by her grandmother, Oopsie, who had never been allowed to raise her offspring during 30 years in a breeding facility.

Ragan said she regularly learns of other apes in need of rescue, but her center is at maximum capacity until she can afford to have more enclosures built. She also hopes for enough donations to create a sustaining endowment for the center.

"While our day-to-day operations are huge, they (the apes) live 50 years - they'll outlive me," said Ragan, who is in her 50s. "We have an endowment established, but it's not enough. We need millions."

Photos, drawings and paintings of chimpanzees and orangutans cover the walls of offices at the sanctuary, along with a few photos of the "patron saint of apes," Jane Goodall. The British researcher and activist visited the center a few years ago.

Like Goodall, the staff at the Center for Great Apes displays an undisguised affection for hirsute hominids. Ragan said she didn't take a salary until two years ago, and she said other employees work for relatively low pay.

"It's wonderful to be in the vicinity of these animals," Ragan said. "It's wonderful to see animals that lived in tiny cages in back yards and garages for a decade or more turn around and get healthy, get active, learn to be social with each other. ... They all have a greatly improved life, but the bottom line is they shouldn't be in captivity at all."

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