

Chumps in the end: Film chimps have short careers

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Ollie and Buddy, the chimpanzees shot dead earlier this month after they attacked a couple at a Kern County, Calif., animal sanctuary, had been retired from show business after having spent their early years working for one of Hollywood's top animal trainers.

Their background underscores how tough a business Hollywood can be for chimps these days and how hard it is to find a place for them to live once their performing days are over.

The 11-year-old male chimps had been sent to Animal Haven Ranch in Caliente, Calif., seven years ago after they grew too strong and unpredictable to work with humans. Chimps are used in the entertainment industry only for the first few years of their lives because they become too difficult to handle, animal experts said.

Many end up spending the rest of their lives - which can be another 50 years - in sanctuaries similar to the one in Kern County. Others, animal rights activists fear, end up being used for medical research.

"By around (age) 7 or 8, they start changing," said trainer Steve Earl Martin, owner of Steve Martin's Working Wildlife in rural Frazier Park, Calif., which provides tigers, monkeys, birds and other creatures for movie and TV productions. "That's just the way they are. It's part of their mind-sets."

Chimps' appeal

Chimps long have been one of the most popular animals in show business, lending comic relief to TV shows, movies and commercials, as well as circuses and other live acts. Producers turn to them because of their human-like qualities. They can smile on cue, perform basic tasks and look sharp in human outfits.

But in recent years, the demand for live chimps and other simians has declined as digital animation allows filmmakers and TV producers to create their likenesses on computers. The animals in Eddie Murphy's remake of "Dr. Dolittle," for example, were computer-generated.

"With computers and animatronics and such, there's not as much demand for chimps and live animals anymore," said Martin. Endla Burrows, director of Jim Henson's Creature Shop in Los Angeles, said studios tend to prefer computer-generated and animatronic creatures because they provide complete control.

"With animatronics or computer graphics, you're getting the exact performance you want, exactly when you want it."

One of the biggest concerns of activists is what happens to primates after their show-business careers end. Some rights groups have speculated that chimps and other animal performers are

sold to medical research or euthanized. Chimpanzee specialist Bob Dunn, who had trained Ollie and Buddy at one time, vowed in a 1988 interview with the Los Angeles Times that he would never sell his chimps to research.

Happy to see chimps go

Patti Ragan, founder of the Center for Great Apes in Wauchula, Fla., is glad that computers are making chimp performances less common.

"These are sentient, intelligent animals, not just little pseudo-humans and clowns. It's becoming more and more politically correct not to use chimp acts anymore. Ringling Brothers hasn't used them since 1993."