

Hurricane Charley 2004

August 2004

On Friday, August 13, the Center for Great Apes was slammed by the eye wall of a category 4 hurricane (Charley) packing 145 mph winds. The 7 humans, 14 chimpanzees, 5 orangutans, and 6 dogs who were at the sanctuary during the storm are safe and unharmed. While the ape facilities (indoor and outdoor) appear to be intact,... the human houses have a few holes in the roofs, (due to huge trees laying on top of the houses),front and back patios smashed.... the pump house was crushed under an oak tree... camera and water lines were unearthed by uprooted trees...our 8' perimeter chain link fence is down in a number of areas felled by oaks... wood fences around the ape habitats are down.... and some sections of the chute system were damaged by huge trees falling on top of them.

Each of our staff and interns bunkered down in one of the ape nighthouses at 5 p.m. with the apes, our provisions, and our walkie-talkies. The brunt of the storm hit us at 6 p.m. and didn't let up until 8 or later. While trees were crashing around us outside, we fed the apes, talked to them, and tried to calm them. (For nearly 3 hours, Christopher made "stress-calls" ...Mari hid under her blanket ... and Grub appeared to be very frightened. Many of the apes wanted to touch our hands frequently for reassurance after they peeked out the windows.

Knuckles slept throughout the storm!) While we were euphoric to have all the people and animals safe... and the facilities intact, it's heartbreaking to see the devastation of our once beautiful tropical wooded sanctuary. Many of our largest oak trees are toppled... some with root systems sticking up in the air 15' high. While many trees are lost, there are more trees looking like they're going over soon. And, we've lost most of our shade-cover for the ape habitats and the chute system running through the woods.

While we were told our power would be out for more than 2 weeks, we were so happy to have it back again within one week! During that time, many wonderful friends brought us water, food for the apes, gas, and generators so we could hook up our water pump and our walk-in cooler. We have months and months of work ahead to clear the property of trees and debris.... especially to limit the fire hazard in the dry season. Volunteers from all over Florida have been coming daily to our aid to help with this back-breaking and sweltering work. We are so grateful for this help and such wonderful kindness!

Volunteers have made a huge dent in less than a week.... The first days after the hurricane, we couldn't even find the paths or reach all the apes without climbing over trees. Today, most of the paths are cleared and all the apes are finally able to go outside into their habitats. (However, until we assess the damage to the chute system, they cannot walk out in the chutes yet.) We still must remove hundreds of dying trees...& thousands of dead limbs. Much of this volunteers can do, but

most of the heavy tree-removal will have to be done by a professional tree removal service. Some of the repairs will be covered by property insurance, but funds are needed to pay for other repairs, clean up, and major tree removal that insurance will not cover. A special Hurricane Recovery fund started to help with this expensive clean-up.

We are very thankful for so many wonderful caring friends and members. This experience has been a bit overwhelming, but it's been helpful to remember that the real beauty of the sanctuary is the apes, the staff, and the supporters who help the apes. We may have lost the lovely landscape (for awhile)... but the apes are safe, and our friends are wonderful.