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Ape outreach

Chimps and orangutans are adored and sought after when they're young, but as they grow older, stronger and harder to control, what becomes of them? Patti Ragan founded a place where apes can be apes.

By LANE DeGREGORY, Times Staff Writer
 Published April 8, 2005

WAUCHULA - Grub grunts happily as Patti Ragan pads along the pine needle path.

"Hey Grubsy! I hear you," Ragan shouts into the trees. She walks beneath palms, weaves through a grove of willows.

His cries get louder as she gets closer. "Okay, Grubsy," Ragan laughs. "I'm coming."

Fifteen feet overhead, the excited chimpanzee is jumping up and down. The steel-mesh chute that snakes through the forest like a giant Habitrail thunders under the ape's 145 pounds.

Grub greets Ragan here, above the path, every day. "Oooga, ummmpa! Uuuka, ummmpa!"

"Good morning to you too, Grubsy!" Ragan smiles. He was one of her first. He and Pongo, the orangutan.

Twelve years ago, the two young apes inspired Ragan to sell her Miami business, give up her manicures and Mercedes, and move into the woods with the refugees.

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Now there are 30.

Butch and Denyse, Radcliffe and Roger, and little Knuckles, who plays on the porch.

Last month, the number of residents at the Center for Great Apes nearly doubled when Ragan adopted 10 chimps and four orangutans from a California trainer. One of the chimps worked with Dennis Miller; an orangutan played a nurse on the soap opera Passions.

Ragan knows all of their resumes. She has seen their tricks, seethed at their treatment. She knows how Butch lost his teeth, why Denyse had to detox. She found out why Radcliffe doesn't have cheek pads, why Roger rocks himself incessantly, and what happened to poor little Knuckles.

The world has all sorts of uses for these apes when they're young, she says. But apes grow old. By the time they're 7, they're often too strong for people to handle. Great apes can live 60 years in captivity. And even working apes don't earn retirement.

"Where is Dennis Miller now?" Ragan asks.

Apes need somewhere to age where they can just be apes, she says. Only some of them don't know how to be apes.

Only four of the center's residents were caught in the wild. Some had never stood on grass, or saw another chimp, until they got to Ragan's retreat.

* * *

In the United States, there are fewer than a dozen chimpanzee sanctuaries. Other Florida refuges include the Center for Captive Chimpanzee Care in Fort Pierce (www.savethechimps.org) and the Suncoast Primate Sanctuary in Palm Harbor (www.suncoastprimates.org)

Ragan's refuge is the country's largest haven for orangutans.

She adopts apes from circuses, research labs, roadside zoos; from folks who thought chimps were cute pets until the apes grew too big to cage.

You can't see her center from the dirt road. The refuge is surrounded by orange groves, tucked beneath a canopy of live oaks laced with Spanish moss. Ragan lives at the front of the property, in a domed house similar in

size and design to the apes' homes. She almost never leaves the sanctuary, except to go to Wal-Mart.

"I used to shop at Saks Fifth Avenue. Now my whole wardrobe comes from Wal-Mart," says Ragan. "I used to get my hair and nails done every week. Now I trim my own bangs. And I don't have any nails left."

Living among apes will do that to you.

She's 50-something, soft-spoken. Her serious face lights up when she talks to apes. She grew up in Miami, majored in education at Florida State. For seven years, she taught Miccosukee Indian children.

In the early 1980s, Ragan started a staffing business. On weekends, she volunteered at Miami Metrozoo.

One spring, needing an adventure, she signed up with the environmental group Earthwatch and went to Borneo to observe orangutans.

Ragan says she had always admired the animals' intelligence. But when she saw them swinging through treetops, as she listened to them grunting to each other across the forest, she heard her calling.

She sold her staffing business, spent five months volunteering in Borneo.

When she finally returned to Miami, she got a request she couldn't refuse.

* * *

The favor seemed simple enough: help look after an ailing infant orangutan. A man at Miami's Parrot Jungle heard she had worked with apes.

Of course, Ragan replied, rejoicing. She visited Pongo every day at Parrot Jungle. He had been sold to a circus but had contracted meningitis before the trainer could pick him up.

While she was caring for 1-month-old Pongo, Ragan met Grub. Parrot Jungle was going to sell the wide-eyed chimp to an Orlando attraction. So Ragan bought the toddler ape, and started searching for a zoo to take her two charges.

She learned a lot about apes that year: that they differ from monkeys because they don't have tails; how orangutans are almost extinct; that chimps are the closest living relative of humans. She also learned about mixed breeds: Pongo is a cross between a Bornean and Sumatran

orangutan. Zoos want only thoroughbreds, she found out.

So she turned to sanctuaries. When she found out there weren't any for orangutans, she started her own.

In 1993, with the money she made selling her business, Ragan set up the nonprofit foundation. Over four years, she walked more than 250 pieces of property from Homestead to Ocala. Finally, a friend showed her the turn-of-the-century homestead outside Wauchula. She bought 15 acres and found a local welder to build the first habitat.

The sanctuary opened in 1997 and now sprawls over 100 acres. It has grown beyond anything Ragan intended.

Last month, her hero, Dr. Jane Goodall, visited the center. Grubs made the famous chimp scientist a paper-bag mask. "With so many retired entertainment chimpanzees and so few places for them to go," Goodall wrote in a note to the center, "it must be a rare treat for those who are able to call the Center for Great Apes home."

* * *

The apes live in small groups. The 10 orangutans don't mix with the 20 chimps. Orangutans come from Southeast Asia. Chimps are from Africa. The species don't coexist in the wild, so they shouldn't have to here, Ragan says.

Denyse, Roger and Knuckles need their own cages. The rest of the apes live in towering domed habitats: three stories tall, 70 feet across, filled with tires and barrels and toys to toss around.

Each ape enclosure is connected to a heated, concrete-block night house, built to withstand hurricanes. Last year, when three hurricanes battered Wauchula, Ragan and her staff huddled in the houses with the apes. The center lost \$100,000 worth of trees, but the animals and employees were safe.

During the day, the apes often go on walkabouts. The brown metal habitats are connected by 2,000 feet of elevated tunnels meandering through the sanctuary. "Each group gets the run of the place on a different day," Ragan says. "And the chutes are connected to our vet clinic, so the apes can walk to their doctors' appointments."

A vet from the Lowry Park Zoo in Tampa visits the sanctuary monthly. He cleans the apes' teeth, checks for parasites. Every three years, he gives them a physical.

Ragan runs the refuge with 12 full-time employees. Another 30 volunteers help with landscaping, fence maintenance and washing blankets. The apes get freshly laundered linens every night.

* * *

Just before lunch, Ragan checks in at the ape kitchen, where plastic bowls bearing each resident's name are spread across the counters. The apes have three meals a day: 10 vegetables and at least four fruits, plus bundles of elderberry and hibiscus to nibble on.

Diane Hilliard, the full-time chef, also prepares special desserts. "Here, try this: dried apple slices with pumpkin pie spice," Hilliard says, offering Ragan a sample. "I think they'll like this even better than the cinnamon ones."

Enrichment treats are the hardest, and most important, things to devise. Employees at the center spend hours trying to dream up activities to keep the apes busy. "It's like running a day care," Ragan says.

In the wild, chimps and orangutans spend most of their time foraging for food. So when they don't have to hunt, they get bored. "We put peanut butter in PVC pipes, so they have to poke their fingers inside to get it, drill holes in boards and shove raisins inside," Ragan says. The apes use sticks or leaves to fish out the treats, like digging termites from a tree.

* * *

Butch has to have softer foods than the others. He was captured as an infant in Africa. For a decade, he drove motorcycles in a circus. The trainer pulled most of his teeth so he wouldn't bite.

When Denyse first came to the sanctuary, she drank two beers a day. She grew up with human parents in Florida, lived in a backyard cage for more than 30 years. Her owners fed her canned pie filling and marshmallows, and shared cocktails with her every afternoon. She thinks she's human, Ragan says. She's scared of other chimps. So she stays in a cage by herself, next to Roger, who also has to be in solitary. "We're trying to introduce them slowly through the bars," Ragan says. "It's like 50 first dates."

The chimp Roger came from a small tourist attraction in Florida. There, he was caged next to Radcliffe, an adult male orangutan. "Roger was terrified of Radcliffe. He's taking longer than anyone else to come around," says Ragan, who has looked after the ape for two years. Roger is hurling himself against the walls of his enclosure, wailing. "It's okay,

honey," Ragan says. "Roger, it's all right."

All the apes' habitats are wired with cameras and microphones so Ragan can monitor them from home. Sometimes at night, when she hears Roger thrashing, she walks over and sits with him while he rocks.

Roger and Radcliffe both were castrated when they were young. Although Radcliffe is 26 years old and, at 270 pounds, is the largest ape at the center, he still has a baby face. He never developed the throat pouch and wide cheek pads that show male orangutans have matured.

The other male apes at the refuge have had vasectomies; females are put on birth control. Ragan won't breed her animals. It's not fair, she says, to bring more apes into captivity just for our amusement.

* * *

By 4 p.m., the apes start heading into their nighthouses. They arrange their blankets and leaves into nests.

"Good-night, Radcliffe. Good-night Geri," Ragan coos, checking in with the orangutans. "Be a good boy, Sammy," Ragan calls. "I'll see you soon."

She closes the heavy door behind her, turns four bolts, then a key.

She's never had an animal escape. Never had an employee injured. She doesn't worry that the apes might attack, though she knows they could. "That's why we never go into their enclosures with them," she says. "We only clean their habitats when they're locked in their nighthouses."

She pockets the key, follows the walkway back under the chute. She pauses near construction crews packing up for the day. A grant from the Arcus Foundation in Kalamazoo, Mich., is paying to erect three habitats plus two nighthouses for the new apes. Each domed cage costs \$150,000; nighthouses run \$350,000.

"It costs about \$10,000 a year to support each ape," Ragan says. Annual operating expenses at the center run \$500,000, and Ragan gets no money from the government. The nonprofit has 300 members, who pay at least \$35 each per year. Half the members are from Florida. Thanks to the Web site, other members come from Australia, Switzerland and Kenya.

* * *

As the sun sinks into the creek, and her employees head home, Ragan

walks back to her house to check on Knuckles. The 5-year-old chimp is waiting on her screened porch, where therapists work with him every afternoon.

Knuckles has cerebral palsy. The California trainer he came from didn't want him. Zoos wouldn't have him. He can't run like the other chimps, can't swing on his right arm or see well.

"Want to come out? Come on," Ragan coaxes, unlatching the porch door. The little chimp lights up when he hears her. "There you go," Ragan says, reaching as he limps toward her. "Here I am."

After two years of training, Knuckles has learned to feed himself. He's starting to climb and interact with other apes. "There's never been another chimp, that we can find, who has survived with CP this long," Ragan says, stroking the thick hair on Knuckles' forehead. "I just don't see a need to euthanize the little guy."

She worries she's not doing enough. She knows of so many cases, orangutans in basements, chimps in tiny cages, roadside attractions where apes are abused. She would like to rescue them all, but can't afford to house them.

"Our little effort here is just tiny and piddling," she says. "If I had \$100-million, I'd buy a country or an island and let them all run free like they were meant to be."

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For more information

The Center for Great Apes is not open to the public. But volunteers are needed, and donations are welcome. Individuals also can become members of the sanctuary for \$35 a year, which entitles them to attend a spring open house at the refuge.

To learn more, visit the center's Web site at www.prime-apes.org E-mail Patti Ragan at pango@prime-apes.org write to her at Box 488, Wauchula, FL 33873; or call the center, 863 767-8903.

About apes

Orangutans come from tropical rain forests on the islands of Sumatra (Indonesia) and Borneo (Malaysia and Indonesia). They have long, reddish-brown hair and small brown eyes. Adult males can grow more



than 5 feet tall and reach 300 pounds in captivity.

Mature male orangutans lead mostly solitary lives and call females with wails that can last 20 minutes. Females give birth every seven to nine years and raise their young alone. Captive orangutans can live 60 years.

Fewer than 30,000 orangutans live in the wild. Logging, farming and gold mining have reduced their habitat. Poaching also is a problem, with hunters shooting mothers to steal their infants.

Chimpanzees originate in the rain forests of Africa, from Sudan and Tanzania, Senegal and Angola. Zaire has the largest population. Chimps have black hair, prominent brows and long arms that reach below their knees. Adult males can stand 5 feet tall and weigh up to 200 pounds.

The most social of all apes, chimps live in communities of 15 to 20. Males seldom leave their birth group. Females migrate to a new colony during adolescence and give birth every four to five years. Like orangutans, captive chimps can live 60 years.

About 80,000 chimps live in the wild. Logging and mining have destroyed their habitats. But the biggest threat is the bush-meat trade, which kills about 6,000 chimpanzees a year for human consumption.

Source: The Center for Great Apes

[Last modified April 7, 2005, 09:07:02]