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Unlikely Partners, Freeing Chimps From the Lab

By JAMES GORMAN

Jane Goodall says it was a "Damascus moment" that turned her from the groundbreaking studies of chimpanzees in the wild that revealed their complex social and emotional lives, to a life of nomadic global activism on their behalf.

That moment, at a conference on chimps nearly 27 years ago, led her to begin a campaign to protect chimps, wild and captive, and inspired numerous animal welfare activists who took up the cause. Last month, they all counted two major victories when two federal agencies took steps that together may come close to halting such research.

"There's a lot of problems in the world, this is a problem we can all solve," said Laura Bonar, the program director of Animal Protection of New Mexico, where the most recent chapter in the campaign for chimp protection began. "The very least that the chimps deserve is for us to work together to see them have some peace and dignity."

Back in 1986, what moved Dr. Goodall were presentations on dangers to wild chimp populations and the treatment of captive chimps in research. She went into the meeting a contented field scientist, and, she says, "I left as an activist."

Until that time, "I always felt that I didn't have the credentials to stand up to some of these white-coated lab people," she said, speaking recently in an interview from her home in Tanzania. "But by this time I had done the book" — "The Chimpanzees of Gombe: Patterns of Behavior" — "and therefore I had more self-confidence."

Over the past few years, as animal welfare groups have mounted a strong but pragmatic campaign against invasive experiments like subjecting chimps to vaccines and treatments for human diseases, Dr. Goodall has been having the occasional conversation with arguably the ultimate white-coated lab person, Dr. Francis S. Collins, the director of the National Institutes of Health and former head of the Human Genome Project.

"I was impressed from the very beginning," Dr. Goodall said of Dr. Collins. "He agreed something should be done and went ahead and did it."

Dr. Collins, who invited her to speak to the N.I.H. staff, said, "I found her to be remarkably realistic and practical, but also idealistic in terms of her views."

And on June 26, Dr. Collins announced that more than 300 of the 360 or so chimpanzees owned by the N.I.H. would be retired to sanctuaries over the next few years.

That followed a proposal two weeks earlier by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service to list all chimpanzees, including those in captivity, as endangered. The plan would raise barriers for experimenting on chimps even higher, by requiring a permit for almost all medical research on the animals unless it involved only observation or tests that are part of normal veterinary visits. Permits would be granted only if the research was judged to be for the benefit of chimpanzees.

Dr. Goodall said the decisions were not the end of efforts to protect chimps in captivity, a campaign prompted by Animal Protection of New Mexico and expanded by groups like the Goodall Institute, the Humane Society of the United States and others.

"There are still chimpanzees in private labs," she said, as well as in other countries, though Gabon is the only other country known to allow medical experimentation on the animals. It is, however, "a very, very important milestone along the way," she said.

The path to the decisions began in June 2010, when the N.I.H. started to move 186 chimps, held in semiretirement at Holloman Air Force Base in Alamogordo, N.M., back into the research stream. The plan was to move them to the Southwest National Primate Research Center at the Texas Biomedical Research Institute in San Antonio.

The animals had been used in research by the Coulston Foundation, at the Alamogordo facility, which closed after many allegations of mistreatment of the chimps. Save the Chimps brought some of the Coulston animals to Florida, where the group has the largest North American chimpanzee sanctuary. Others were still being held at the facility but were not used in research.

"That's what triggered all of this," said Sarah Baeckler Davis, now head of the North American Primate Sanctuary Alliance. One of the leaders of the movement, she has both a Ph.D. and a law degree. Dr. Davis had run a sanctuary and has worked with the Goodall Institute in the past. ("I read about her in fourth grade," she said of Dr. Goodall, "and I wanted to be her.")

"That's when we all yelled and screamed about the move," she said, "because they were supposed to be a

holding colony."

Ms. Bonar of Animal Protection of New Mexico said the N.I.H. move was so egregious that "the public was outraged."

"We reached out to the public and to all of our elected leaders," she said.

Bill Richardson, then the governor of New Mexico, objected to the move, and that December, Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall, both of New Mexico, and Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, all Democrats, called for a high-level review of the need for chimpanzees in research.

Other animal welfare groups — like the Humane Society and its president, Wayne Pacelle; the Jane Goodall Institute; and the New England Anti-Vivisection Society — rallied to the cause. The N.I.H. relented, and Dr. Collins asked the Institute of Medicine to perform the requested study.

Dr. Collins said recently that he did not know what the institute's study would conclude. "It was entirely possible that group might have said, 'My goodness, there are so many things that we need to know for human health that we can only figure out by studying chimpanzees and if you care about yourselves and your families and your children, this is just something that we should continue, albeit with great attention to ethical principles.' "

"But," he said, "that's not what they said."

Instead, the report, released in December 2011, concluded, despite vigorous arguments from some scientists, that almost no research on chimpanzees was necessary, with the possible exception of some work on preventive vaccines for hepatitis C, still in midstream. The report said other techniques, like using cultured cell lines, and other animals, as well as human testing, were just as good.

Chimpanzees, the report said, said should be used only in cases necessary for human health, and even then, the animals should be housed in social groups, with plenty of space and enrichment.

Dr. Collins set up a working group to advise him how to implement the Institute of Medicine findings. Last month, he accepted the working committee's recommendations, released in January, almost in their entirety.

"Much of chimpanzee research could no longer be justified because we had other ways to get the same

answers," Dr. Collins said of his decision.

"Then you factor into that that chimpanzees are special creatures," he added. "That they are biologically possessing of similarities to ourselves that are quite breathtaking."

Ms. Bonar said Dr. Collins deserved credit for his actions. "When you look back at the history of work with chimps, you could call the agency almost intractable." Change was long overdue, she said, "but someone had to have the courage to start it."

Katie Conlee of the Humane Society of the United States said, "I'll always think of Dr. Collins as having a legacy of doing what's right by the chimps."

Dr. Collins said he was interested in assessing the value of using chimps in research even before the Alamogordo conflict, after some scientists had raised questions "about whether, in fact, the scientific needs were sufficient to justify maintaining this colony of so many chimpanzees."

Of the pressure from senators and others, he said: "Did that hasten the efforts to get the science looked at by the Institute of Medicine? I suspect it might have sped it up a little bit, but we would have gotten there anyway."

Dr. Collins cautioned that there were still areas of disagreement between the N.I.H. and the animal welfare movement. "Now obviously if we moved from talking about chimpanzees to talking about mice and rats, we'd be in a different place," he said.

For now, the goal of the N.I.H. and animal welfare groups is the same: to find homes for the retiring chimps.

At the time, in the mid- to late 1980s, Ms. Goodall began to work against experimentation on chimpanzees, they were no longer being imported into the United States, but they were routinely being bred. The N.I.H. was increasing breeding to produce more of the animals to study AIDS, a program that was not successful. Many chimpanzees now in research institutions or sanctuaries were born during that period. Chimpanzees in captivity can live up to 60 years, so many of their parents are also still alive.

A female chimpanzee named Jody, for example, was used as a breeder at a Pennsylvania laboratory. She had nine babies, all quickly taken away to be used in research, and two miscarriages, before she ended up at Chimpanzee Sanctuary Northwest a few years ago. "I often think about what they've lived through," Dr.

Goodall said. “Some of them, the older ones, must remember a bit about the forest, though.”

While some of the N.I.H. chimpanzees that are being retired, including a number of babies bred at the New Iberia Research Center in Louisiana, have already arrived at Chimp Haven in Louisiana, others face an uncertain future. Not all research chimps are owned by N.I.H., and as such, may not be retired.

Even for the N.I.H. chimps, there are challenges ahead. Sanctuaries must find room. Money must be found. And the N.I.H. is planning to keep a colony of about 50 chimps available should it need research that is not possible any other way — for instance, on an emerging disease that strikes humans.

“I want the public to be aware,” said Jennifer Whitaker, the executive director of Chimpanzee Sanctuary Northwest, “that there are reasons to celebrate, but not all of the chimpanzees will be retired.”

Nor will the animal welfare movement stop at chimpanzees, as all parties are aware.

“What the chimpanzee has done is to prove there is no hard and fast line dividing us from the rest of the animal kingdom,” Dr. Goodall said. “Once you admit that we’re not the only beings with personalities, minds, capable of thought and emotions, it raises ethical issues about the ways we use and abuse so many other sentient, sapient beings — animal beings — every day.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: July 9, 2013

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article referred incorrectly to Chimpanzee Sanctuary Northwest, east of Seattle. It is a private sanctuary and is not affiliated with the National Institutes of Health.