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50 Years of Chimpanzees

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Jane Goodall went to the Gombe Stream Reserve near Lake Tanganyika in East Africa when she was 26. By living among the animals and quietly recording their interactions, she was able to show that the chimp world included love, hate, fear, jealousy, tool use, brutality, even warfare. I spoke with Dr. Goodall last month at Western Connecticut State College, where she was giving a lecture, and then later by telephone. A condensed version of the conversations follows:

Q. In July you celebrated the 50th anniversary of your first trip to Gombe Stream Reserve. When you arrived there in 1960, could you have imagined the life that lay ahead?

A. Of course not. I was a young girl, straight from England, more or less, no degree of any sort, and Louis Leakey was giving me this amazing opportunity to live with the animal most like us.

There'd been no long-term studies of great apes. The longest had been George Schaller, with mountain gorillas, and he'd stayed a year. I think Louis Leakey thought the study might last 10 years. But at 26, I thought perhaps three. And then the more I learned about chimpanzees, the more I realized there was more to learn — until I couldn't stop.

Q. So you got to Gombe, and very soon, you observed something astounding: Chimpanzees used tools to fish for ants.

A. I went in July. And tool-making was toward the end of October.

Q. After you had lived with the wild chimpanzees for a year, Dr. Leakey sent you to Cambridge for a doctorate. How did the conservative professors there respond to you?

A. They didn't know what to make of me. But I was very fortunate in that I had one of the most erudite of all the animal behavior people, Robert Hinde, there. He proceeded to help me to write in such a way that I couldn't be torn apart by my more pompous scientific colleagues.

For instance, I had written that when Fifi's (one of the Gombe chimps) brother was born, she was jealous of the others coming to try to touch him. Robert said, "You can't say 'jealous' because you can't prove it." And I said, "Well, I'm sure she was!" And he said, "I suggest you say, 'Fifi behaved in such a way that had she been a human child, you would say she was jealous.'" That is so clever. No one can say anything about that. There's nothing that isn't fact.

Q. When you first reported chimp tool use, Dr. Leakey declared, "We must now redefine man, redefine tool or accept chimpanzees as human!" Did that ever happen?

A. It's never happened. Every time someone has shown that chimpanzees or any other animal possesses a characteristic which we used to think was unique to us, there's an outcry from either scientists or religious people: "It can't be so."

It becomes illogical. For a long time people used chimpanzees in medical research because of all the amazing biological similarities. They used them to investigate not only human diseases but mental conditions like depression. Yet, they are still reluctant to admit similarities in mind and expressive emotion.

Q. There are 185 captive chimpanzees at the federal primate facility in Alamogordo, N.M., that may soon be used for medical research, particularly to study Hepatitis C. Why have you been trying to stop that?

A. Because it's morally wrong. We scientists have proved pretty conclusively that chimpanzees can suffer, that they can anticipate arriving pain. They do have feelings. If you perform an invasive procedure on an animal that is capable of suffering and feeling pain, your behavior is amoral.

These particular animals have been "retired" from experimentation for the past 10 years. Now suddenly someone has decided that they need to experiment on them again. I don't know why. We're lobbying. I've tried to see the head of the N.I.H. My latest information is that some of them have already gone back into medical research — and this was just as the labs (that use chimps as research subjects) were being closed.

Q. The advocates of this policy argue that short of using humans for these tests, chimpanzees are best.

A. I'm sure there are other ways. There are alternatives on the market today that at one time the animal experimenters said we will always need animals for.

Q. On a different subject: There's continuing debate among linguists and primatologists about whether other great apes have the capacity for language. What's your position?

A. It seems to me that the controversy is about whether other primates have grammar in their communications. And to be honest, I'm not interested in whether or not they have a grammar. Why would they? I've always felt there are so many fights in this life, so many battles that seem important to win. Like in the beginning I was incensed to be told that chimpanzees or any animal couldn't be "he" or "she," but they had to be an "it" and that I couldn't talk about adolescence or motivation or childhood, that those things are unique to humans. This language thing, I'd rather leave it to people who are involved in that line of inquiry. I've been fighting battles that, to me, were important, and that relate to emotions. Do they feel pain or sadness? Do they have minds capable of thinking or planning?

Q. I read somewhere that before you went to Africa, you were a debutante. Can that be true?

A. I was. My father's sister married the son of one of the last lord chief justices of India. And he wanted to "present" his niece. But the thing about being a debutante is that it's a marriage market. When you come out, you have a big party and you go to Ascot. Well, we couldn't afford anything like that. So I got a dress that had been modeled by someone. It was very cheap — gorgeous, but cheap. I literally went to the palace and curtsied to the queen and left. This was about two years before I left for Kenya. That kind of life was never, in the remotest, appealing. I wanted to go to Africa. Because of Dr. Dolittle taking the circus animals back. And then Tarzan. Those were the two books that inspired me to go to Africa.

Q. Are there areas of your life that you regret?

A. Not really. Probably for my own personal peace of mind, it would have been nice if I hadn't divorced Hugo (van Lawick), my first husband, for the sake of Grub (their son). But then I wouldn't have married Derek (Bryceson, the head of the Tanzanian National Parks), and then probably Gombe would have collapsed.

Q. You don't get to Gombe very often now. In fact, you are traveling 300 days a year for your conservation charity, the Jane Goodall Institute. Living in a different hotel every night, constantly encountering new people: that has to be difficult.

A. Well, it is a jolly tough way to live, but it's worthwhile. Because everywhere I go, there are shining eyes. There are children from our Roots and Shoots program who are all so excited to meet "Dr. Jane" and tell me what they've been doing to make the world a better place.

There's a Roots and Shoots member in the Eastern Congo — where the bush meat trade is decimating wildlife — and he had an uncle who was a hunter. He persuaded the uncle to give it up and become a chicken farmer. Between them, in two years, they've changed 75 hunters. When I meet people like that, they give me energy and hope.