

## **In the Positive Side: What's fair for the chimps of the Alamogordo Primate Facility?**

**By Dr. Judy Long For the Sun-News**

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The race is on: 186 chimpanzees, veterans of medical research, will either go to a lifetime of freedom at a Florida sanctuary or back to a medical research lab in San Antonio, Texas. The time frames are different: The transfer to freedom could be accomplished within a year; the transfer to Texas has already begun, and is scheduled for this summer. Pending legislation in Congress (the Great Ape Protection Act) would provide retirement for these animals, but only if it passes.

A little background: A colony of chimpanzees, veterans of experimental research, have been retired to a facility in Alamogordo since 2002. These animals have been rescued once, from the Coulson Foundation which, after repeated complaints of animal abuse, went bankrupt. The chimps are currently housed in the Alamogordo Primate Facility on the grounds of Holloman Air Force Base. Holloman has in force a policy banning invasive research on site.

This was to be a well-deserved retirement for the chimps. The deal was they would nevermore be subjected to research by human beings. A tidy little government contract (\$42.8 million) has provided for their care. That contract is due to expire in May 2011.

And suddenly, the whole deal is off. Was it a cost-cutter's sharp eye that said, "If we don't provide for these chimps any more, we will save money on their upkeep and the care contract. We can sell them off to Texas and recycle them for research purposes."

Are there serious issues of animal-welfare here?

Or is it a handy paradigm for our cost-cutting times?

Gov. Bill Richardson has taken sides: He has sent a letter to the Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack protesting that the proposed transfer would violate animal cruelty laws.

The question of cruelty seldom comes up in the context of animal experimentation, where the value of science is unquestioned. The problem arises when we try to assign value to animal life. But it is apparent that where no value is assigned to animal life, there is no weighing of scientific gain vs. animal harm before the research begins. Some have called this the boundary of ethics vs. science.

In the coverage of the Alamogordo chimps in the press, I have read nothing about the procedures to which these chimps were subjected during their "scientific careers." In the past, chimps have been used in the attempt to find a vaccine for hepatitis C for 40 years, with little or no result. This has involved repeated blood tests, liver biopsies, anesthesia and injection with viruses.

Some authorities are doubtful about chimps as a model organism for humans, since it appears that cancer, heart and kidney disease, and viruses such as HIV manifest and develop quite differently in the two primate species. We have to ask, realistically, what is to be gained by continuing this research with these animals?

Many of the procedures involved in animal experimentation seem barbaric to lay people. Currently, institutions that routinely engage in animal research have reconsidered their policies. Veterinary schools, for example, traditionally used "acute" conditions to teach their students about necessary treatment of trauma. (Acute experiments are those the animal does not survive). With current technology, however, vet schools have found that these teaching goals can be achieved via computer simulation. They can run the simulations as often as necessary, with no loss of life.

Readers have often heard that chimps are our nearest primate relatives. To be precise, they share more than 98 percent of our DNA. While they are not as good-looking as humans, they, like us, are playful and affectionate. Like us, they are omnivores. They invent and use tools; they have language (though we have not yet mastered it). Their gestation

period is close to ours (eight months instead of nine) and, like ours, their young are born immature and helpless, requiring care from adults in order to survive. Like many of us, the chimps at the Alamogordo Primate Facility buy local: Their apples have been provided by a nearby farmer for 28 years.

The life expectancy of a chimp is about 50 years. Many of the chimps at Alamogordo are elderly, some unwell. An unknown number have permanent injuries or conditions resulting from their experiences as research subjects. One cannot help wondering, will they be culled before or after the move?

Laura Bonar of Animal Protection of New Mexico will be in Las Cruces to speak on the prospects for the chimps of Alamogordo. The public is welcome at the meeting, at 10:30 a.m. to noon Sunday at the Unitarian Universalist Church, 200 S. Solano. Laura can also be contacted at <http://apnm.org>.

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