CCK-17

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Close encounters of the furry kind

Casey C. Kelso
Lusaka, Zambia
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Peter Bird Martin, director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter:

I shall never forget this past Monday, no matter how many other experiences I crowd into the years to come. On that day, my childhood dreams were restored in a Zambia forest clearing where I discovered the delight of having intelligent and fun-loving animal companions. Only the furry friends I met that day were not creations of my imagination. They were real enough. They giggled when tickled, and playfully sneaked through the long grass to pounce on me. Other times, they snuggled in my arms and napped.

I thought I had lost forever such magical contentment many years ago when, in my rush to grow up, I refused to play "Let's Pretend" any longer and instead chose the sophistication of hanging around my older brother and sister. As a very young boy, before I was in a hurry to be an adult, my mother read to me from a book called "Mother West Wind's Children," which has charming stories about talking animals who live in a meadow together, playing, quarrelling and mending friendships. Nature assumed some distinct personalities in those tales: somber Grandfather Frog, good-natured Chuckie Wood Chuck and sly Freddie Fox.

But as I grew older, I learned it was childish and even wrong to attribute human characteristics to animals. Books and teachers drummed into my head that wild creatures do not think or feel like us, but act instinctively in a cruel life-or-death struggle to survive. A bird's song is not a lighthearted warbling for fun but a desperate claim to territory, they said. The 1970s television show, "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom," further convinced me that real nature consists of chilling violence. Each week, Marlon Perkins narrated another dangerous episode of animals attacking each other for mates or food. Nature became a topic for detached scientific study -- fascinating but remote, and without any of the wonderful animal friends I once met in story books. On Monday, however, I found that forgotten wonder.

My wife Bobbie Jo and I spent several hours looking after

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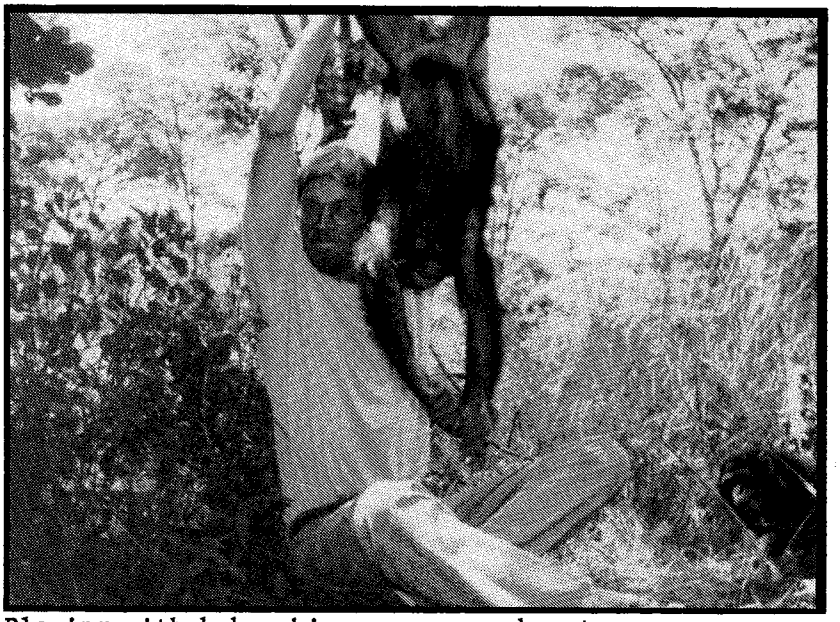
five baby chimpanzees as they played and acquainted themselves with the wild. They live in Zambia at the Chimfunshi Wildlife and Chimpanzee Orphanage, which sits on a 10,000-acre ranch near the northern border with Zaire. The chimpanzees romped with us like small children, like sentient teddy bears, like Winne The Pooh and all his friends. Each of the infant chimps had a personality as innocent and curious as a human child, despite the tragedy and subsequent misery they suffered before coming to Chimfunshi.



Playing with baby chimpanzees can be strenuous

At the turn of the century chimpanzees were found, in their hundreds of thousands, in twenty-five African nations. From four countries they have disappeared completely. In five others, the population is so small that the species cannot long survive. In seven countries, populations are less than five thousand. And even in the four remaining central strongholds chimpanzees are gradually and relentlessly losing ground to the ever-growing needs of ever-growing human populations. -- From "Through A Window: My 30 years with the chimpanzees of Gombe," Jane Goodall, 1990

Young chimpanzees start life in Central and West African countries like Zaire, Guinea or the Ivory Coast, in limited territories fast becoming encroached upon by human settlements and logging. Poachers kill the adults to sell the chimpanzee meat, considered a delicacy, in the market. But the baby chimp is the most valuable prize for the poacher. Pound for pound, young chimpanzees are more valuable than ivory or rhino horn. They are sold as pets and entertainers and for up to US $40,000 each as laboratory animals in the biomedical research industry.

The trade in any chimps other than those born in captivity is illegal, and how the smugglers capture, treat and transport those from the wild is horrific. Experts say up to 10 adult chimpanzees are killed in the struggle to wrest a youngster away from its clutch on the

dead mother. Once successfully seized, the infant is crammed into a cage or box, with its feet and hands often tied with wire or rope. Some are beaten or burned with cigarettes. Some end up on airplanes headed to other countries, where their captors falsely claim the chimps are captive-born and therefore a commodity unprotected by laws governing the trade of endangered species. The International Primate Protection League estimates up to nine out of 10 chimpanzees die before they reach the final destination. For those that survive, a fate perhaps worse than death awaits them in a research lab.

The five chimpanzees I spent the day with are orphans, rescued from one fate or another. In a way, my knowledge of what they were rescued from makes them special. But they are also special simply because they are chimpanzees. Research shows that the physiology, brain and nervous system of chimpanzees closely resembles our own, as does their social behavior. Primate experts say human DNA differs from that of chimpanzees by only about 1 percent, making them mankind's closest relative. Chimpanzees share human emotions. They laugh and feel jealous or sad. The baby chimpanzees looked me in the eye, smiled, petted me and groomed my beard. One even kissed me sweetly on the lips. They were gentle and loving, but there were also sad signs that they remember their trauma at the hands of poachers.

Just like badly abused children, these chimps clung to me for security, desperately needing love and cuddling. Normal baby chimpanzees in the wild will be carried by their mothers for the first three or four years and continue to nurse for up to five years. Even after weaning, most chimps have a close relationship with their mother for the rest of their life. A chimpanzee is not considered mature until age 12 or 13, in a life span of up to 50 years. The dependence on the mother is so strong that her death can prompt a young adult chimp to lose the will to eat and die from grief.

Doc takes aim for a leap on me

In the forest

As I sat cross-legged under a tree, one chimp repeatedly scrambled up the branch above me and jumped onto my head. "Doc" would then clamber up my back and sit on my shoulder,

smacking the crown of my head like a bongo drum. When I twisted around to tell him to knock it off, his brown eyes twinkled and his lips curled into a smirk. Then off he'd race, climbing back up the tree for another swan dive onto his new-found friend.

Sheila Siddle, who owns and runs Chimfunshi with her husband David, remembers finding Doc tied by cloth strips to a bed in a dimly lit shack. Two Zairian men wanted to sell the confused and frightened baby chimp for $2,500. After the knots on his bonds were untied, Doc hugged Siddle around the neck and wouldn't let go while she stalled until authorities arrived to arrest the men. Doc was taken back to Chimfunshi, biting Siddle on the forearm once he apparently felt safe in the car. The two smugglers were later released by police, probably after paying a bribe. But the 2-year-old chimp remains at Chimfunshi, to grow up as a normal chimp among others of his kind.

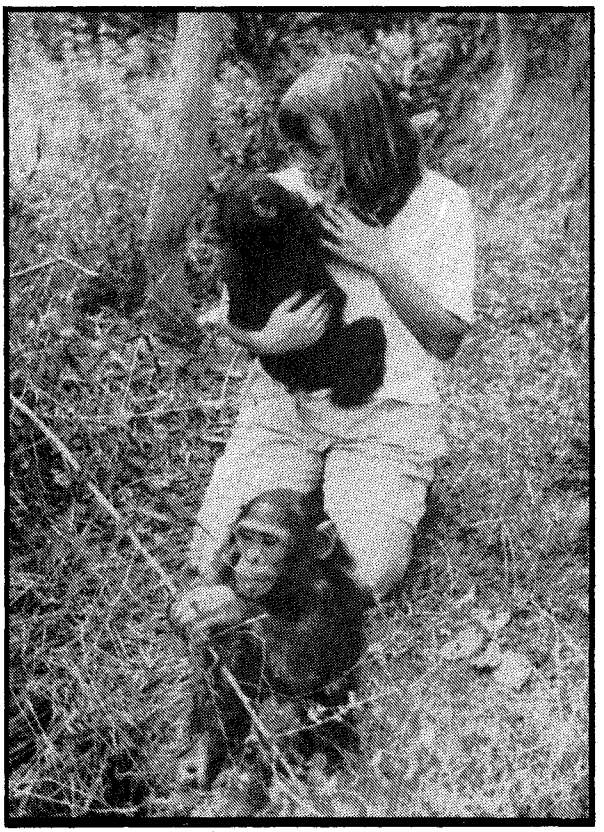
"Diana" is ticklish, so I loved to worm my index finger under her ear or chin to hear her quiet "heh-heh-heh" laugh as she curled herself into a quivering ball. Other Zairian smugglers almost sold Diana for $7,000 to a traveling circus visiting Zambia. Finding her difficult to sell off, however, they stupidly wandered into the Zambian government's Species Protection Department in the capital of Lusaka. They wanted help in finding a buyer! The men were arrested, the 15-month-old chimp confiscated, and the Siddles had yet another orphan needing care.

Tickling Diana under the chin

"Tsabu" is the most boisterous of the bunch. He swung from tree to tree and explored the forest higher and farther than the others. Once, the 2-year-old chimp became curious about my glasses and snatched them off my face, carrying them away into the tree tops. The only way to get them back was to gather up the other youngsters and pretend to walk away. Anxious about being abandoned, Tsabu scrambled down from his perch and galloped into my arms, thereby surrendering the glasses. "Violet," about a year old, looks to Tsabu for security. She follows after him, crying when she cannot keep up. When I held fearful Violet in my arms, the tiny chimp untucked my T-shirt and pulled it over herself like a tent, snuggling securely inside her nest against my belly.

A woman spotted Tsabu and Violet, crammed together in a cardboard box and close to death from dehydration, at the Johannesburg airport in the baggage claim area. In turn, the Zairian "owner," Mrs. K. Kapinga, offered the South African customs officer US$15,000 to turn a blind eye and pass the animals through without proper import papers. The concerned bystander protested loudly to officials and Kapinga was arrested. But like other poachers, she received lenient punishment: a $200 fine and deportation. Tsabu and Violet were flown to Chimfunshi.

The last chimp in the group arrived in February from Burundi after being confiscated from a Zairian poacher. The U.S. Peace Corps volunteer who rescued her remembers the poacher referring to the chimp as **le truc** (or "the thing"), so she named the infant "Trixi." This poacher spent just two weeks in prison and paid a $60 fine. Although Trixi recovered from severe malnourishment, emotional scars remain. After cuddling for awhile, Bobbie Jo put Trixi down to join her play-fellows. Frightened and angry, the chimp had a temper tantrum, shrieking and slapping the ground until Bobbie held her close again. The others scampered and tumbled together but Trixi stayed near Bobbie after that, reluctant to leave the safety of her arms.



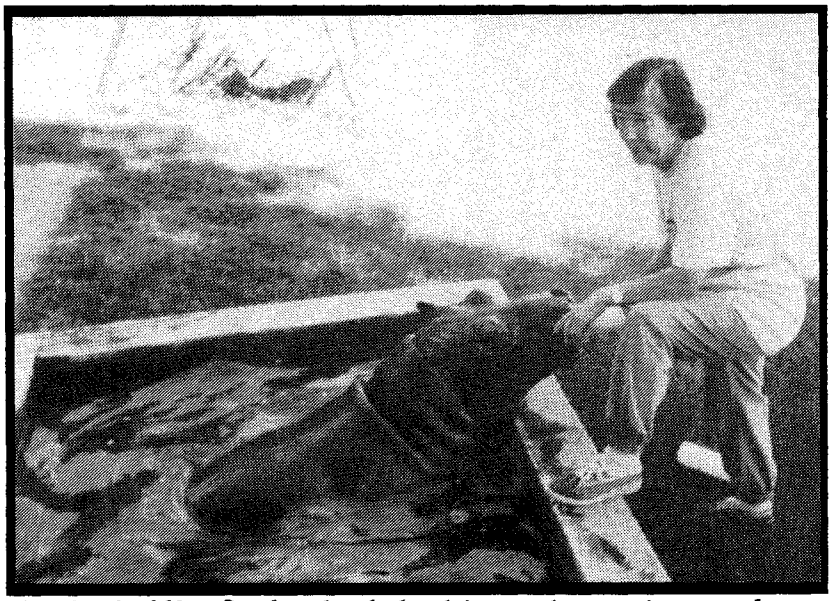
Bobbie Jo comforts Trixi

Such outings into the woods are not intended to rehabilitate the baby chimps to the wild. We didn't try to show them how to climb trees or dig for tasty grubs. I wouldn't have known, anyway, though I might have tried chewing on a termite if it would have been instructive to the youngsters. The chimps instinctively knew which fruits to pick or which thorny trees to avoid. A Chimfunshi employee, Bobbie Jo and I were there to provide reassurance and support while they explored what would be their native environment.

In the beginning

To hear the story from the Siddles, their founding of the chimpanzee orphanage was an accident. "It just happened," Sheila Siddle said. "Someone heard I was good at nursing wounded animals and brought us a chimpanzee. It just took off from there." That

was 10 years ago, when the couple retired to the ranch with plans to leisurely fish on the Kafue River. David Siddle had been a successful building contractor, running eight different businesses in Zambia during his 40-year career. But their love of animals prompted them to accept strays and today the orphanage is home to dogs, monkeys, antelope, a baby hippo and 43 chimpanzees. They don't have many fishing trips or holidays. Sheila Siddle starts her day at 5 a.m. feeding the first bottle of milk to Billie the 4-month-old hippo, then distributing milk and bananas to the chimpanzees as the sunrise paints the sky orange.



Sheila Siddle feeds the baby hippo three times a day

These chimps, rescued from human exploitation, face a dilemma. If they go back into the wild, they could be shot by poachers, mainly because they lack a fear of humans and therefore make easy targets. Even if protected from poachers, little habitat remains for wild chimps. And contact with their own kind could be deadly, since strange chimpanzees are often killed by chimpanzee troops already present. So here they must stay.

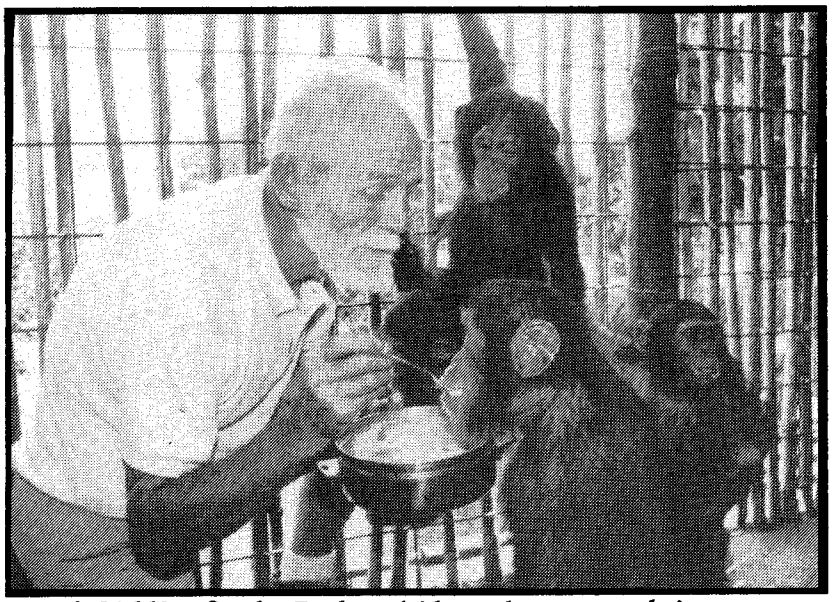
The challenge the Siddles face with older chimpanzees is how to break down their belief that they are human while integrating them into a chimpanzee community. Unlike the five infants, most of the juvenile and adult chimps have spent too much time with humans, forgetting how to act and interact like chimpanzees.

"The thing that has hurt the chimpanzees is that people have tried to humanize them," said David Siddle as he watched the older chimpanzees eating. We stood on a platform atop a seven-acre enclosure filled with trees and thick brush. He threw corncobs, sweet potatoes and bananas to each chimp from above. The cement-block wall stretches in a semicircle, with both ends running out into the Kafue River, which forms a natural barrier to the non-swimming chimps. Outside the wall is a human world, but inside it's strictly a chimpanzee society. The danger in raising such smart creatures lies in teaching them too much about human habits and leaving none of their own, he said.

"We were well on the way to humanizing a chimp ourselves in 1983, when Pal came here," Siddle said. "He was the first. His face was smashed in and he was dying. Pal was a baby, still on the boob, so he slept in our bed and Sheila taught him how to use the loo." As word spread that they accepted chimps confiscated from poachers, more started arriving at the Siddles' doorstep from other African countries, Israel and even Papua New Guinea. Four chimps came in 1984, another four in 1985, and six more in 1986. So when the Siddles built the first enclosure, they integrated Pal into a community of chimps where he eventually found a niche in the hierarchy. Said Siddle: "He had to be shoved in with others. (We thought) maybe there will be a big punch up, but he's got to realize he's a chimp."

In the sanctuary

"That's Charlie, the dominant male," he said, pointing to a large chimp with wiry black hair bristling on end to make him look even larger than a 15-year-old chimp usually appears. Charlie hooted and rushed about, waving his arms at the other chimps. "His job is to kick ass and he does it so well," Siddle said. "Even Sheila can't go down in the enclosure with Charlie. Just a small smack with his hand would break her ribs. He's got good bush sense. He's a proper chimp."



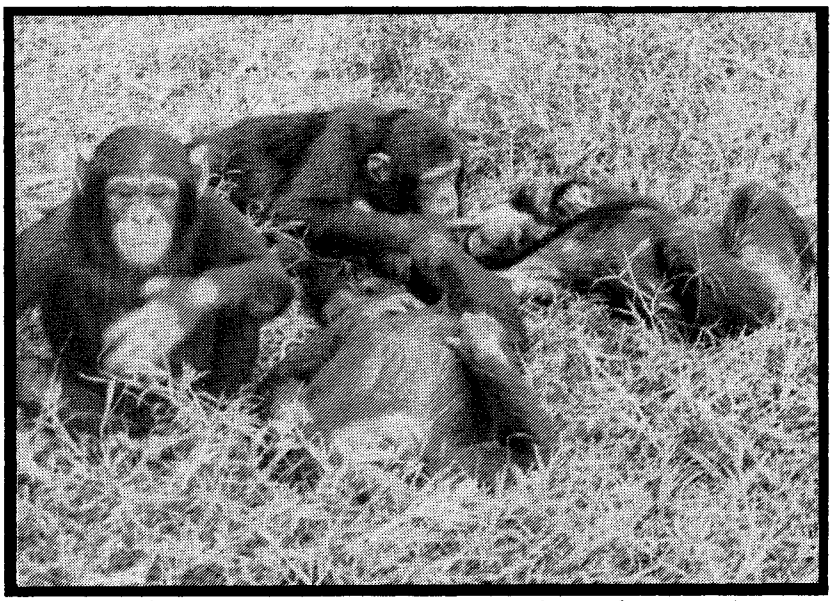
David Siddle feeds Tsabu while others crowd in

In contrast, he pointed out a younger female chimp that suffered a harder transition. "That's Rita, who was switched off when she came here," he said. "She banged her head against the wall and rocked for hours during the night. She lived with a young woman who raised her to eat at the table and sleep in the house. But when Rita got too big, she was put in a cage in the garden. At the age of five, they're as strong as humans, so this woman kept her locked away."

For nearly two years, Rita remained imprisoned without any contact or stimulus, despite her upbringing as a virtual human child. Rita must have been bewildered by her owner's betrayal. Pet owners often appreciate cuddly, docile chimp babies but want

to be rid of larger, rebellious youths. When a no-longer-cute juvenile chimp begins to bite and be aggressive, owners exile the chimpanzee to a cage or the local zoo. Others have the chimp's teeth or even thumbs removed. Or they destroy the pet that has become a menace. It took five months at Chimfunshi before Rita played and interacted normally. The Siddles believe Rita was mentally imbalanced by her incarceration. Said David Siddle: "We had a chimpanzee expert visiting here who told us that Rita must be more intelligent than average, because it's the bright ones who suffer most when put in with others to be chimps again."

At the second enclosure of 14 acres, Siddle fed the chimpanzees through the bars of their sleeping building. At this compound, adults alternate in the outdoor area with a nursery of juvenile chimps, who are watched over by a gray-haired chimp matron named Noel. The stories here are just as sad.



A group of juvenile chimps enjoy a lazy day in the sun

"That big male is Chiquita. He belonged to an Italian who kept him chained with a collar on the neck," Siddle said. "Chiquita was smoking and drinking. I think that chimp was even on dope. He craved his cigarettes when he came in 1986. I was smoking at the time, threw my fag down and Chiquita jumped on it and took a long draw, holding it in like a smoker who's been without for months."

Of all the chimpanzees the Siddles have integrated into a group, the most challenging has been "Milla," who was 18 when she arrived at Chimfunshi in 1990. "With wild chimps, it's no question of interacting (with humans), they would just run away," Sheila Siddle said. "But these chimps take advantage because they have been around humans. Milla has been humanized; screwed up."

Milla is still learning how to be a chimpanzee. She was taken from Cameroon when she was 1 year old, and then bought by a traveling British couple in a West African market. They, in turn, gave her to Tanzania's Mount Meru Game Sanctuary, but Milla somehow eventually ended up in a cage at a nearby hotel bar. She

"For years, I have admired what you have done, are doing and will always do for chimpanzees. The reality is, I think, more wonderful, more impressive than the imagination. I put off coming for two reasons: 1) not enough time, 2) I knew that, when I came, I would become utterly involved. I have. I promise I will do what I can for the chimpanzees of Chimfunshi, and for the two of you, Sheila & Dave. -- Jane Goodall's comment in the Siddles' guest book, 8-11 June 1990

entertained guests by demanding soft drinks or beers. Ultimately, noted chimpanzee researcher Jane Goodall arranged for Milla to go to Chimfunshi. Archeologist Louis Leakey sent Goodall to Tanzania more than 30 years ago to study the behavior of wild chimpanzees, in the hope of understanding our common ancestor. Goodall reports she has learned not only about the chimpanzee's place in nature, but also about **man's** place in nature. Said Sheila Siddle: "Jane calls Milla a 'Grand Lady.' Jane went to the trouble to give the lady a chance to meet other chimps and be a chimp again. It was the greatest gift she could give Milla."

When Milla first arrived, she would hand any human near her cage her aluminum pot, spin the person around and point toward the Siddles' house. "She would send you to get her tea!" David Siddle said. "Every day, the African workers loved it, so they would show up at the door saying 'Milla wants more tea!'"

The transition hasn't been easy for Milla or the Siddles. Sheila Siddle admits Milla can be a "bitch," perhaps even a little mentally disturbed from her long contact with human cruelty. "The other chimpanzees will bite when fighting with each other, but their teeth won't break the skin," she said. "Milla, on the other hand, will bite to draw blood. We're a bit concerned that the others are afraid of her, even Chiquita [the dominant male in that enclosure]. Milla sent him running yesterday during a confrontation, which is something that should never occur in the wild." But Milla appears to have found some contentment and happiness living among her own kind, although she hadn't seen another chimp for 17 years and had to give up cigarettes and tea.

In the future

Zambia was once a clearinghouse for an illicit but booming trade in chimpanzees. The Siddles' efforts have made an impact on that trafficking. Unless sanctuaries like Chimfunshi are available to accept chimpanzees, however, authorities have little motivation to confiscate smuggled and pet chimps. Poaching will continue to be profitable. There are a few other chimpanzee shelters on the African continent (see box, page 10), but none presently accept more chimps. The Jane Goodall Institute plans to build a sanctuary on the shores of Lake Tanganyika in Burundi, but it could be years before that dream is realized.

There has to be a limit on how many chimpanzees the Siddles can accept, but so far it has yet to be reached. "How can you refuse a baby?" asked Sheila Siddle. "We can refuse chimps from a research center because they may be infected with a disease, or an elderly chimp from a zoo, but how can you refuse a baby who needs a home?" Outsiders who visit Chimfunshi or hear about the orphanage often feel the same and want to play a role as well. A woman in Sweden started an adopt-a-chimp program that has brought in money from 1,500 sponsors. Proud "parents" get a portrait of their chimp, a newsletter and a Christmas card. A West German motorcycle parts mogul has helped solicit donations by distributing his version of the newsletter. Another group in Florida recently began a fund-raising project by selling T-shirts depicting endangered primates. The Siddles accept all financial help: operating a wildlife orphanage is expensive, and they have a vision.

According to the International Primate Protection League, the oldest chimpanzee refuge is in The Gambia, set up in 1972 in Senegal and then moved to the present site. Up to 40 chimps there share three islands.

In the Congo, 20 chimps have been released on an island in the Conkouati Reserve by Habitat Ecologique et Liberté des Primates (HELP). Also in the Congo is the continent's newest sanctuary, which opened last year near Pointe Noire for 35 orphaned chimps, some held temporarily at Brazzaville Zoo.

In Burundi, a couple care for about 20 rescued chimps in cages pending plans to build a compound.

In Uganda, the Entebbe Wildlife Education Center hopes to eventually release chimpanzees from the zoo onto an island.

In Britain, Monkey World houses 24 chimps, most from a rescue center in Spain. The chimps were confiscated from beach photographers using them as props.

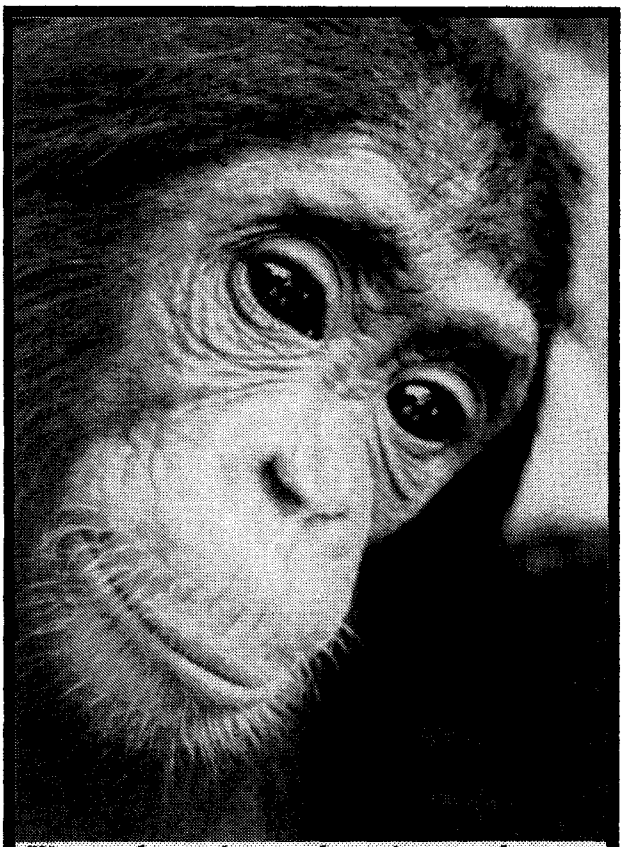
They plan to build a wall across two bends in the Kafue River, to create a 4,000-acre sanctuary to accommodate up to 60 chimpanzees. The territory could also be home to other endangered species, like wild dogs, black rhinoceros, and Lechwe antelope, the Siddles said. They have bought the land, but their present costs are already high. They feed chimpanzees, pay veterinarian bills, employ chimp caretakers and run a generator to electrify fences at the two enclosures. Additional funding is needed from grants or donations, so the couple are forming a foundation to continue their work. But talk of money puts the Siddles on edge. They distance themselves from anything to do with raising money, although they receive up to 70 or 80 visitors a week and even overnight guests who eat dinners in their home.

To contact Chimfunshi, write to: P.O.Box 11190, Chingola, Zambia

"People say we should charge admission, but we just can't do

that," David Siddle said. "What, will I have to sit out there with a ticket box collecting money from the tourists all day?" And he even balked at putting up a donation box for people who want to leave money. "Our biggest concern is that we'd be accused of commercializing the chimps. We don't want that, so we'd rather not ask. Also, we'll know where the money comes from when people spontaneously hand us money." People do just that. While Bobbie Jo and I visited Chimfunshi, a Danish couple nonchalantly left two stacks of bank notes on a table "to help feed the chimpanzees."

A larger territory on the Siddles' ranch could mean the chimpanzees may even forget about the Siddles, living out their lives in the forest without any intervention from man. That dream motivates the Siddles, who have released 17 vervet monkeys and 13 yellow baboons into the forests around Chimfunshi after they had been nursed back to health. In a way, it's already beginning to happen: two baby chimpanzees have been born at the orphanage, starting a second generation that lacks the perilous knowledge of humanity. "I hope the third generation will be back to normal chimps, and therefore frightened of humans," Sheila Siddle said. "Eventually, someday, we will take down the fences and they can live freely here. I don't think in my lifetime they could ever go back to Zaire or wherever they come from. The forests are being cut down so fast,

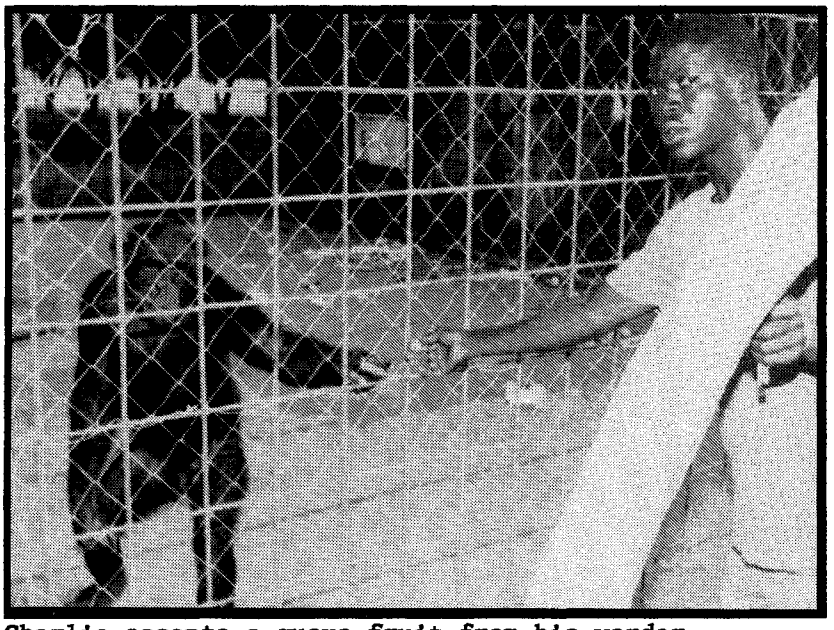


"We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals... We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours, they are more finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth."
-- from "The Outermost House," Henry Breston, 1925.

it will be 100 years before there might be a change of policy in Africa. But I believe we will be here to restock those countries when it happens, since we have breeding females here."

In the zoo

It was depressing to see the alternative to such a preserve for chimpanzees after spending four days at Chimfunshi. When Bobbie Jo and I returned to Lusaka, we visited two chimps at Mundawanga Zoo, which is being refurbished with U.S. assistance. The chimpanzees, "Charlie" and "Tina," had stayed at Chimfunshi for a few months. The Siddles assumed the duo would remain, but zoo gate receipts fell precipitously without the chimpanzees. So the authorities demanded Charlie and Tina back. Now the two live together in a barren cement-floored cell. They stare vacantly at the humans who come to taunt them.



Charlie accepts a guava fruit from his warder

"Iwe!" shouted a Zambian teen-ager in a group of young people. "You! You!" He held out a potato chip. Charlie stared, then reached his long, thin hand through the bars of the cage. "Clap! Hey! Clap!" the man shouted. Next to Charlie, Tina poked out her two hands and began to clap. She was rewarded with the potato chip. The girls in the group tittered. The man railed at Charlie for a few more minutes, then held out his bag of potato chips only to snatch it away. "This one, he is too proud," said the teen as he sauntered away. An attendant then handed Charlie a guava fruit, too green to be edible, shook his head and also walked away. The chimpanzee sat motionless, his hand still sticking out of the cage, lost in a reverie. What was Charlie thinking, as he looked out into space? Does he ever remember Chimfunshi, where he once roamed among other chimpanzees? I remembered an old West African tale that says monkeys can really talk, but wisely refuse to do so because they know man would put them to work once their intelligence was revealed. Perhaps if chimpanzees like Charlie did talk, what they would tell us about their lives -- and about ourselves -- would be too awful to hear.

Sincerely,

Casey Stein

Received in Hanover May 24, 1993