

## Veterinary Opposition to the Keeping of Primates as Pets

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### Introduction:

The Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association opposes the private ownership of dangerous and exotic animals. That includes the keeping of primates as pets, since this practice poses a risk to public safety and public health. It is also harmful to the welfare of the primates in question and weakens conservation efforts undertaken to protect their wild counterparts from extinction. The following document describes the compelling case for phasing out the practice of keeping primates as pets, as the majority of states have already done.

### Primates pose a risk to public safety.

Primates are wild animals who have not been – and should not be – domesticated. Given their profound intelligence and behavioral complexity, they are inherently unpredictable, even to primatologists and other experts. Even the smallest monkey species are incredibly strong and can inflict serious injuries with their teeth or nails, including puncture wounds, severe lacerations, and infections. Attacks by apes are frequently disfiguring and can be fatal.

Purchased as cute and manageable infants, primates inevitably become aggressive, destructive, and territorial as they mature, often attacking their owners or other people, escaping cages, and causing damage to household items and property. These dangerous and unwanted behaviors are the natural result of forcing these animals to live in environments that are inappropriate physically, psychologically, or socially. When their living conditions fail to permit acceptable outlets for natural behaviors, the result is horror stories that frequently appear on the evening news.

Although it is likely that most incidents go unreported, records show that since 1990, more than 300 people— including 105 children—have been injured by captive primates in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Some of these attacks have caused permanent disability and disfigurement. Children have been attacked and injured by pet primates while riding their bikes, playing outdoors, visiting local parks, walking their dogs, and shopping at malls and grocery stores. Traumatized youngsters have been bitten by macaques who tested positive for the deadly Herpes B virus, subjected to painful rabies-protection injections, sent to the hospital to be tested for a variety of frightening diseases, suffered bite wounds that penetrated to the bone, and lost fingers.

### Primates pose a public health risk.

The National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians (NASPHV), an organization of local and state professionals who regularly consult with physicians,

emergency rooms, legislators, local officials, schools, health departments, and the general public on preventing exposure to and controlling diseases that humans can get from animals and animal products, recommends legislation prohibiting private ownership of primates “due to the potential for highly fatal and rare zoonoses, severe injuries, and serious wound related infections.”<sup>2</sup>

Non-human primates can spread deadly viral, bacterial, fungal, and parasitic infections that pose serious health risks to humans, such as tuberculosis, shigellosis, hepatitis A and B viruses, *Campylobacter*, *Klebsiella*, Herpes B, Simian Immunodeficiency Virus, and poxviruses.<sup>3, 4, 5</sup> In fact, more than a hundred zoonotic diseases (infectious diseases that are transmitted from animals to humans) have been identified in primates.<sup>6</sup> While contracting some infectious diseases from non-human primates may be rare, the consequences may be death or permanent disability. Infants, young children, the elderly, and those with weakened immune systems are especially vulnerable.

Up to 90 percent of adult macaque monkeys—which are popular in the pet trade—are infected with the Herpes B virus. Infected monkeys are often asymptomatic, yet human exposure through monkey bites or bodily fluids can result in fatal meningoencephalitis.<sup>7</sup> Macaques living in households with children have tested positive for Herpes B.<sup>8</sup> Macaques are not the only species who may harbor Herpes B virus infection. The virus was confirmed in a colony of captive capuchin monkeys who showed no symptoms of infection and put lab workers who were unaware of their infectious status at risk.<sup>9</sup>

In 2009, an incident at the California National Primate Research Center in Davis revealed that there might be more pathogens than previously thought with species-jumping potential when an adenovirus was transferred from titi monkeys to workers at the Center, sickening three people.<sup>10</sup>

In 2006, Health Canada instructed the Canadian Blood Services to start rejecting potential blood donors who cared for or handled monkeys or the animals’ body fluids in a current or past job. People in Canada who work with monkeys can no longer donate blood because of fears they may spread Simian foamy virus (SFV), a retrovirus similar to HIV. Between 70 to 90 percent of captive-born primates have the antibody that indicates exposure to SFV.<sup>11</sup> Lab workers and zoo personnel who are occupationally exposed to primates such as monkeys, chimpanzees, and baboons have become infected not only with SFV, but also with simian immunodeficiency virus and simian type D retrovirus.<sup>12</sup>

Zoo professionals and lab workers understand zoonotic disease risks and wear protective gear including impervious gloves, goggles, face masks, lab coats, and shoe covers while working around certain primate species, yet people who keep the same primate species as pets fail to take any precautions and often put others at risk by taking their pets out in public and showing them off to visitors at home.

Officials should also be aware that rabies vaccines are not legally approved for use in exotic and wild animals. While an exotic animal such as a capuchin monkey may have received rabies vaccinations,

there are no trials or studies to demonstrate how protective or statistically effective these vaccines actually are in many exotic species.

**The private possession of non-human primates adversely impacts animal welfare.** Primates are extremely intelligent and have complex social, physical, and psychological needs. All primate species lead busy, active, stimulating lives. Most are highly social and naturally live in pairs or family groups with whom they travel, groom, play, build nests, sleep, and raise their offspring. Many primates spend up to 70 percent of their waking hours in foraging-related activities. They have excellent climbing abilities and many are arboreal. In private hands, however, primates are typically denied mental stimulation, sufficient exercise, proper nutrition, relationships with conspecifics, the opportunity to express natural behaviors, and the ability to make significant choices.

Captive infant monkeys are typically forcibly removed from their mothers within just hours or days of birth—a practice that is inhumane and traumatic for both the mothers and the babies. Such early separation may deprive the infant of adequate nutrition and immunities against diseases as well as interfere with the infant's normal development. Premature separation of mothers and their offspring often results in poor health and behavioral abnormalities in the infants, some of which can persist throughout a hand-reared infant's lifetime. For example, hand-reared primates almost always develop dysfunctional and neurotic behaviors such as circling, rocking, spinning, body clasping, self-mutilation, over-grooming, and hair plucking that results in bald patches.

It is virtually impossible for private citizens to provide physical, psychological and social conditions that ensure the welfare of captive primates. Since most primate species are highly social animals, failure to provide access to a sufficient number of conspecifics harms their psychological and behavioral health. In laboratories, inspections that assess compliance with the federal Animal Welfare Act provide some assurance that primates' psychological welfare is being considered, as required by law. Private owners of primates have virtually no oversight. Environmental enrichment – an entire subfield in zoo, sanctuary, and laboratory captive primate care – is left to the discretion of typically poorly informed private owners of pet primates.

Private owners, in a futile attempt to make the animals less dangerous, often mutilate primates by having their teeth extracted. This painful procedure involves removing a significant amount of facial bone and may result in chronic health problems. The alternative practice of cutting canine teeth at the gum line (crown amputation) exposes sensitive endodontic nerves and leads to tooth root abscesses. Neither procedure prevents the animals from inflicting harm. Ultimately, weary of attacks on people and destruction to the home, pet primates are often relegated to a life of increasing isolation, loneliness, frustration, and neglect.

Primates are also extremely susceptible to a host of human diseases, which often cause severe – and even fatal – disease in the animals. For example, the human herpes virus responsible for causing cold sores can be fatal to some monkeys and common human respiratory viruses and bacteria are known to cause fatal pneumonia in chimpanzees and other primates.<sup>13</sup> As in the case of zoonotic disease,

private owners are frequently unaware or willfully ignorant of the potential for common human ailments to cause severe suffering, disease, and death in pet primates.

Finally, because private owners of pet primates often have an unhealthy emotional attachment to the primate in their care – seeing it as a surrogate infant – they frequently resist appropriate veterinary care, giving anthropomorphic reasons such as inability to separate from the primate for a veterinary intervention.

### **The private possession of primates adversely impacts conservation efforts.**

Keeping primates as pets is detrimental to true wildlife conservation efforts and conservation professionals, including renowned primatologist Dr. Jane Goodall, the Wildlife Conservation Society, and the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, oppose the private ownership of primates.<sup>14,15</sup>

When people see others interacting with primates, including pet monkeys and apes, it undermines conservation efforts by decreasing public awareness about the plight of endangered species, decreasing donations to conservation programs, and facilitating poaching and trafficking of wild animals. Specifically, studies have found that people viewing a photograph of a chimpanzee with a human standing nearby were 35.5 percent more likely to consider wild chimpanzee populations to be stable and healthy compared to those seeing the same picture without a human and that people who viewed images of people interacting with chimpanzees less frequently donated to conservation.<sup>16,17,18</sup> There is no evidence that the conclusions of these studies would not apply to other threatened and endangered primate species.

In addition, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has recognized that there is a danger of “captive-bred [wildlife] ... [being] used for purposes that do not contribute to conservation, *such as for pets* [emphasis added] ... or for entertainment” and that “uses of captive wildlife can be detrimental to wild populations”.<sup>19,20</sup>

### **Primates are no longer federally recognized as service animals.**

In 2010, the federal government revised its definition of service animal under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and primates are no longer recognized as service animals under the ADA.<sup>21</sup> The American Veterinary Medical Association does not support the use of primates as assistance animals because of animal welfare concerns, the potential for serious injury to people, and risks that primates may transfer dangerous diseases to humans.<sup>22</sup> With such widespread agreement that the use of primates as service animals is ill advised, it stands to reason that they are also unsuitable as pets.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 52 people reported being bitten by macaque monkeys between 1990 and 1997. The CDC noted, however, that “owners of pet macaques are often reluctant to report bite injuries from their pets, even to their medical care providers” for fear that their animal would be confiscated and possibly killed.

<sup>2</sup> National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians (NASPHV), Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists (SCTE), Position Statement on the Maintenance of Non-Human Primates as Pets.

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<sup>3</sup> Gail Golab, PhD, DVM, Congressional Testimony of Dr. Gail Golab, Director of the Animal Welfare Division of the American Veterinary Medical Association, on the Captive Primate Safety Act, March 11, 2008, <<https://www.avma.org/News/PressRoom/Pages/Testimony-golab-080311.aspx>>.

<sup>4</sup> David M. Renquist, D.V.M., M.A. and Robert A. Whitney, Jr., D.V.M., M.S., "Zoonoses Acquired From Pet Primates," *Veterinary Clinics of North America: Small Animal Practice*, 17 (1) 219-240, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Stefanie Grethe, Jens-Ove Heckel, Wolfram Rietschel, Frank T. Huffert, "Molecular Epidemiology of Hepatitis B Virus Variants in Nonhuman Primates," *Journal of Virology*. 2000 Jun; p 538.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Cleaveland, M.K. Laurenson, L.H. Taylor, "Diseases of humans and their domestic mammals: pathogen characteristics, host range and the risk of emergency," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences.*, 356 (1411), 991-999, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cdc.gov/herpesvirus/signs-symptoms.html>

<sup>8</sup> Ostrowski SR, Leslie MJ, Parrott T, Abelt S, Piercy PE. B-virus from Pet Macaque Monkeys: An Emerging Threat in the United States? *Emerg Infect Dis* [serial on the Internet]. Volume 4, Number 1 - 1998, March. Available from <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/4/1/98-0117.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Coulibaly C, Hack R, Seidl J, Chudy M, Itter G, & Plesker R. A natural asymptomatic herpes B infection in a colony of laboratory brown capuchin monkeys (*Cebus apella*). *Lab Anim.* 2004 Oct;38(4):432-8.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Price, "New virus jumps from monkeys to lab worker," *Science*, July 14, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> "Monkey handlers can't give blood," *Edmonton Journal*, December 23, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> William M. Switzer, "Frequent Simian Foamy Virus Infection in Persons Occupationally Exposed to Nonhuman Primates," *Journal of Virology*, March 2004, p. 2780-2789.

<sup>13</sup> Hester Buitendijk, Zahra Fagrouch, Henk Niphuis, Willy M. Bogers, Kristin S. Warren and Ernst J. Verschoor. "Retrospective Serology Study of Respiratory Virus Infections in Captive Great Apes," *Viruses* 2014, 6, 1442-1453;

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<sup>14</sup> Testimony of Dr. Jane Goodall before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans, March 11, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Association of Zoos & Aquariums, White Paper, Personal Possession of Non-Human Primates, July 21, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen R. Ross et al., *Inappropriate Use and Portrayal of Chimpanzees*, *Science* vol. 319, pg. 1487 (2008).

<sup>17</sup> Stephen R. Ross et al., *Specific Image Characteristics Influence Attitudes about Chimpanzee Conservation and Use as Pets*, *PLoS One* 6(7) (July 13, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Kara Schroeffer et al., *Use of "Entertainment" Chimpanzees in Commercials Distorts Public Perception Regarding Their Conservation Status*, *PLoS One* 6(10) (Oct. 12. 2011).

<sup>19</sup> 57 Fed. Reg. 548, 550, January 7, 1992.

<sup>20</sup> 44 Fed. Reg. 30044, 30045, May 23, 1979.

<sup>21</sup> "Highlights of the Final Rule to Amend the Department of Justice's Regulation," Implementing Title II of the ADA" factsheet, Available at: [http://www.ada.gov/regs2010/factsheets/title2\\_factsheet.html](http://www.ada.gov/regs2010/factsheets/title2_factsheet.html). Accessed June 21, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> American Veterinary Medical Association. Nonhuman primates as assistance animals. Available at: <https://www.avma.org/KB/Policies/Pages/Nonhuman-Primates-as-Assistance-Animals.aspx>. Accessed March 16, 2017.