

Primates As Pets

NON-HUMAN PRIMATES AS PETS

The prosimians (lemurs), monkeys, and apes—the non-human primates— are amazing, beautiful, and wonderful animals that are admired by people around the world. However, this admiration too often leads to the desire to possess these animals, because they are exotic, unusual, and in many ways very similar to ourselves. Unfortunately, most people are ill-equipped to properly care for these complex and demanding creatures, which ultimately leads to abuse, neglect, and abandonment. If you or someone you know is considering obtaining a non-human primate as a pet, please read the following sections which will present to you the realities of owning a primate.

PRACTICAL CONCERNS

All non-human primates are wild animals. They have not been domesticated as dogs, cats, and common farm animals have. While it is true that dogs and cats are descendents of wild animals, they were selectively bred for generations to produce animals that can successfully coexist with humans. Simply put, if an early ancestor of the modern dogs were vicious towards humans, or did not herd farm animals well, or could not track wild game well, it was not bred, whereas individuals with these traits were bred, ultimately resulting in the breeds we are familiar with today. This took many years and many generations of selective breeding. This has not been done, nor is it currently being done, with monkeys or apes. Because they are wild animals, it means that they are not predisposed to live with humans, and more importantly, generally exhibit unpredictable, destructive, and dangerous behaviors. Primates love to explore, and in general their form of exploring involves destruction. If a non-human primate gets loose in your house, they will destroy everything in sight—clothing, furniture, family heirlooms, your groceries, your valuable papers, etc. You can also expect that a pet non-human primate will bite you at some point, often causing major damage, scarring, and even loss of fingers. Consider that Helping Hands, an organization that breeds monkeys to assist the disabled, pulls the teeth of its monkeys. The same is not done for seeing-eye dogs, because although it is possible that these dogs may bite, it is highly unlikely. This is not so for monkeys and other primates.

Non-human primates come with a large price tag, and their lifelong care is also extremely expensive. Most monkey species cost US \$2500-\$5000 to purchase, and a great ape such as the chimpanzee costs \$50,000. If primates are legal in your area, you will probably have to pay for a license (from organizations such as USDA, US Fish and Wildlife Service, or other country, state and local agencies.) Housing is also expensive; like it or not, your “pet” is going to have to stay in a cage much of the time, and a properly cared-for primate deserves a large indoor/outdoor enclosure with sturdy climbing structures and a regular fresh supply of bedding. Feeding is also expensive: a bag of monkey chow has to be special-ordered and can cost \$25 per bag. Primates also require a variety of fresh produce daily. Veterinary is also cost-prohibitive, that is, if you can *find* a vet who knows how to treat primates. Because primates are susceptible to the same diseases as humans, you will probably find that your primate will get sick more often than a dog or cat would, and may require more expensive medications and procedures. Primates get bored very easily and require a wide variety of toys and playthings. Only the most sturdy dog toys or toddler toys will do, and often cost \$10 or more apiece. In general you can expect that a primate will cost you anywhere from \$5-\$15 *per day*, for basic care. This can add up to nearly \$165,000 over the lifetime of a primate.

People buy primates as babies, and there is no doubt that they are very cute and adorable. But it does not take long for a primate to grow up and lose that babyhood cuteness. Primates can live to be 20-50 years old or more, depending on the species. This is a long time, and requires an extreme commitment. Unlike a human child, a primate does not grow up and move out of the house eventually! Having a primate is like caring for a 2-year-old human child for the rest of your life! Many things change in a person's life—marriage, divorce, children, a move, a new job, an illness—that make it impossible for a person to commit to caring for a primate for this long. Unlike dogs and cats, which adapt quite well to a change in environment, or a new person in the family, primates require consistency and stability. In addition, it would be very difficult to find someone willing to make that kind of commitment to your pet primate should something happen to you, such as a severe debilitating injury, or death.

As discussed above, primates are capable of causing severe injury to yourself and others. Primates have a natural tendency to establish dominance over others as they grow older, and primates do this by chasing, scratching, and biting their target. The target could be you, your partner, or your child, and there will be little warning of the attack. Primates are also highly defensive of their social group and will make every attempt to keep strangers at bay, again by chasing, scratching, and biting. A stranger to a monkey may be your neighbor, a delivery person, or a family member who does not live in your household. (This means you won't be able to take vacations anymore—who would take care of the primate?) If your monkey bites someone (and the likelihood is great that it will) you risk having to pay for expensive medical bills, are subject to lawsuits, and you may have your primate confiscated and destroyed.

Primates are also carriers of disease, some fatal to humans. All macaque monkeys are potential carriers of Herpes B, a virus that is fatal in humans 70% of the time, and causes serious neurological damage to those who survive the disease. Even if you survive Herpes B infection, it does not go away—the infection is permanent, and you will have to take expensive suppressive drugs for the rest of your life. Monkeys and apes also carry hepatitis, SIV (the non-human primate version of HIV), cytomegalovirus, shigella (which causes bloody diarrhea), and a host of other viruses that are as yet unknown to science. Some viruses known to exist in monkeys appear to not cause acute disease in humans, but may in fact be linked to the development of some types of cancer.

MORAL AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

Primate breeders sell infant primates to line their pockets, plain and simple. When you buy a non-human primate from a breeder, you are kidnapping an infant from its mother, a cruel and inhumane act. Non-human primate mothers love their babies very much, and will fiercely defend their children. A monkey mother will have to be forcibly held down or drugged, and the infant ripped from her body, all in the name of profit. Some breeders will tell you that the infant was orphaned, but this is very rarely the case. Breeders depend on healthy mothers to maintain their business. Even if your particular primate was truly orphaned, do you think all of the primates that breeder sells were orphaned? You are supporting a cruel industry nonetheless. How would we as humans feel if some other species were capable of overpowering us and taking our children for their amusement? We kill man-eating lions (or in one case, a human-child-eating chimpanzee) for taking our children, we kill wolves, bears, and cougars because we think they will take our children, yet we think nothing of taking the children of other primate species.

The vast majority of non-human primates in exotic animal sanctuaries are former pets, abandoned by their owners who were injured by them, grew tired of them, or simply were incapable of properly caring for them. The few legitimate sanctuaries available to take in unwanted primates are non-profit organizations with limited budgets and limited space. There simply isn't room for any more unwanted non-human primates, yet these sanctuaries get called every single day by individuals wanting to dump their "pet" primates on them. You may think that won't be you, but no one who calls a sanctuary thought they would be doing so when they brought their furry baby home for the first time. Why take that chance? Don't contribute to the problem—help sanctuaries instead by donating money, supplies, and time.

Some breeders that sell primates as pets claim that they are helping to save primate species from extinction. But how does taking a primate from its mother, dressing it in little doll clothes, and forcing it to live with humans rather than with its own kind contribute to the survival of the species? This does nothing to support the rapidly dwindling wild populations, which is where conservation efforts must be focused. Many breeders actually sell endangered species, which is a violation of the United States Endangered Species Act except in select circumstances. If you are buying an endangered primate species, you are probably doing so illegally and may face criminal prosecution.

This is perhaps the most important point made in this article: The **thousands of dollars (or pounds or yen) you will spend on purchasing and caring for a "pet" primate could go a long way in the effort to save wild populations of primates.** The money could be used to purchase land inhabited by wild primates to prevent its destruction, to pay for education efforts in countries where primates live, to pay salaries for anti-poaching patrols, etc. etc.

BUT I WANT TO BE AROUND PRIMATES!

We do not deny that non-human primates are a pleasure to be around, in the right situation and circumstances. There are many ways you can make non-human primates a part of your life without supporting the primate pet trade, and contributing to the growing numbers of unwanted primates. Here are some suggestions:

Volunteer at a local zoo or exotic animal sanctuary.

Get a degree in biology, anthropology, psychology, or zoology and study primate behavior in the wild or in captivity.

Get a degree in veterinary technology, veterinary medicine, or animal science and obtain employment at a zoo or sanctuary.

Travel to Africa, Asia, or Central/South America and see primates in the wild. (If you can afford a monkey, you can afford a plane ticket!)

Take a year off from work or school and volunteer at a primate sanctuary or rehabilitation center in Africa, Asia, or Central/South America.

Simply visit your local zoo often and get to know the primates there as individuals. Before long you'll know names and faces as well as you know your human friends—and the animals will recognize you too!