



NOT A LAUGHING MATTER: CONSERVATION EFFECTS OF MEDIA PORTRAYALS

By Steve Ross

In a recent automobile advertisement, a man in a cheap and disheveled gorilla outfit stands holding a clipboard while a young chimpanzee holds a similar prop right next to him. A joke is made and the chimpanzee grimaces and throws his hands over his face in a mock gesture of frustration. All around America, viewers chuckle at the humor, and likely, even note how eerily similar chimpanzees can act in comparison to humans. But how do these images affect how people perceive great apes? Is there reason to believe that visitors are picking up on the fact that there were no real gorillas used in the commercial? Could contrived portrayals of these endangered species affect public attitudes about important conservation issues or should outspoken advocates against these practices loosen up and let the public have their laughs?

A few years ago, Beck et al. raised the issue of using animals in entertainment and advertising in the Member's Forum of *Communiqué* (May 2005, p. 47-49). In that piece, the authors describe the cruel and dangerous practices used in making animal actors compliant and how these media spots rarely include good information about the biology and conservation of the species they portray. Indeed animal welfare concerns have been the most-cited reasons for opposition to the use of apes as performers and photo props in recent years. While these objections remain valid and animal welfare should continue to hold a large stake in the opposition of these practices, new evidence points to additional and potentially broader consequences.

It started with a simple question: Could people's misperceptions about chimpanzees be traced to their inappropriate portrayal in the media? It's a line of inquiry that many have toyed with but without objective data, it remained nothing more than a hypothesis. That was until a small pilot survey study at the Saint Louis Zoo in 2002 asked visitors which apes they felt were endangered. The study showed that the proportion of visitors who classified chimpanzees as "not endangered" differed significantly between chimpanzees and three other ape species. Furthermore, the majority of respondents specifically pointed out that the prevalence of chimpanzees in movies, television and commercials led them to this conclusion. It was an eye-opening result that was raised at a midyear Ape TAG meeting and drew consensus that a more extensive survey should be done to validate these findings.

In the summer of 2005, as part of a larger survey on the effects of a new facility on public knowledge and attitudes on apes, 1,000 visitors to Lincoln Park Zoo's Regenstein Center for African Apes were asked to answer 56 questions. The final question addressed the issue raised in the Saint Louis pilot study and further fortified the methodology. Respondents were asked to examine three photographs: a gorilla, an orangutan and a chimpanzee (the order of the photographs was randomized). They were then asked if they thought that each of those three apes was endangered. There were encouraging results for gorillas and orangutans as 95 percent and 91 percent of respondents correctly labeled them as endangered species. However, one of every three respondents incorrectly identified chimpanzees as not being endangered. When asked why they didn't think chimpanzees were endangered, those respondents



PHOTOS © MICHAEL DURHAM, OREGON ZOO

POLICY ON THE PRESENTATION OF ANIMALS

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The Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) is dedicated to excellence in animal care and welfare, conservation, education, research, and the presentation of animals in ways that inspire respect for wildlife and nature. AZA's position is that animals should always be presented in adherence to the following core principles:

1. Animal and human health, safety, and welfare are never compromised.
2. Education and a meaningful conservation message are integral components of the presentation.
3. The individual specimens involved are consistently maintained in a manner that meets their social, physical, behavioral, and nutritional needs.

again most frequently identified their common appearances in movies, television and commercials. Further validation came from a replication of the study (n=132 respondents) at the Great Ape Trust of Iowa (Des Moines, Iowa) and together these results garnered worldwide attention when they were recently published in the prestigious journal *Science* in February 2008.

So what do these results really mean? Our interpretation of these data is that the commonly frivolous portrayal of chimpanzees – dressed in clothes and trained to perform silly tricks – in the popular media has potentially serious consequences on public conservation attitudes. Here, the data suggest that it creates the impression that chimpanzees may be quite common (i.e. not endangered) and perhaps not worthy of conservation effort or resources. What does this mean for groups trying hard to raise funds for chimpanzee conservation if the public doesn't think they are threatened in the wild?

In addition to media-created misperceptions about chimpanzee conservation status, media effects can also distort understanding about basic biology. Those working at zoos with chimpanzees have likely heard the surprise of zoo visitors when they see a full-grown adult male. "They're so big! I thought they were just little like on TV." These misperceptions of basic biology and natural history create an uphill struggle for organizations like AZA zoos who are working hard to educate the public.

Of course the use of chimpanzees as “entertainment” extends beyond their appearances in movies, television programs and advertisements. Because it is still legal to privately-own a chimpanzee in the vast majority of states, there are many small businesses that bring young chimpanzees (and other primates) to birthday parties and fundraising events around the country. As with their more celebrated cousins, these chimpanzees are likely subject to the same suboptimal care and housing and their presence at events might create the same misperceptions of their endangered status.

With the support of AZA and the Ape TAG, the Chimpanzee SSP has engaged in frequent letter-writing campaigns voicing concern to companies that use chimpanzee “actors” in their advertisements. For the most part, these letters go unanswered and presumably ignored. But there is reason for optimism. A growing number of companies are now publicly stating that they will no longer use ape actors in their campaigns – including Puma, Honda, Comcast and most recently, Subaru – the company that used the chimpanzee and the salesman in the gorilla suit described earlier. The fact that there is now objective, published data demonstrating the potential conservation effects of media portrayals – in addition to the serious welfare aspects of this industry – provides ample justification for organizations such as AZA and their member institutions to speak out against these practices. Public advocacy on issues such as these only lend strength to AZA’s growing public role as a leader in issues involving animal welfare and conservation.

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