

# **PRIMATE WORSHIP? OR DEPO-PRIVATIONS?**

## **Life-Span for Congolese Women Less than Famous Chimp in Captivity**

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“Hiasl” is a captive chimpanzee that will soon see his day in court. An attorney has been hired, Hiasl’s slick legal briefs are being groomed, and when Hiasl appears before the court in Vienna the judge will be asked to grant Hiasl the rights of a human being.

This is one of the lead stories on CNN right now, and the feature highlights how the legal team representing Austrian chimp “Hiasl” will include the famous primatologist Jane Goodall.

Will they make a monkey out of the judge?

Goodall and other animal rights experts will attempt to convince authorities that Hiasl should have human rights. This is a rather stunning turn of events, given that the very people who live in the areas where Hiasl comes from have hardly any human rights at all.

In the jungle of international human rights, the primate protection community and international conservation organizations can hardly be said to care a sniff for the rights of the humans who live in the environments of the great apes themselves.

Take “Florence Njagali,” (name changed) a sixteen year-old girl who was raped by soldiers when she was fourteen. Florence is lucky--she is alive to tell the tale. Indeed, she dreams of the day when CNN reporters and Anderson Cooper and the monkey-show of CNN will descend on her village and bring her face to the international primate protection scene. Why, Florence would even be willing to hop up and down, and scratch her head like her cousins in the forest, if she could only get some attention shined on the exploitation of her land.

Florence lives today in a remote village in the eastern Congo, the Great Lakes Region of Africa, known also as one of the last refuge landscapes for two of humanity’s nearest living relatives: the chimpanzees and gorillas of the Great Ape family, a family which includes humans. But CNN better hurry: the average age of life in these parts is about 40 years old for women and for men.

With a lifespan of 60 years in captivity, and a monthly expense account of \$6,800 for food and veterinary bills, Hiasl’s “human rights” far outstrip the rights of our poor Congolese woman. Florence couldn’t imagine what she might do with \$6,800 a month--

she has never seen more than \$20 in one place in her life. She's got no bank account, and there aren't any banks. She doesn't receive a government check, because there isn't what you'd call a government, and the postal system hasn't worked for years.

Alas, back in Vienna, with café au lait and cappuccinos at their desks, the attorneys representing the already wealthy chimp will argue that Hiasl is a person and therefore has basic human rights. "We mean the right to life, the right to not be tortured, the right to freedom under certain conditions," Eberhart Theuer told the Associated Press. Poor Hiasl needs a guardian who can look out for his rights, activists like Goodall are saying.

Human rights proponents might want to look more closely at the propensity to popularize primate protections over people protections.

Florence Njagali lives in a zone that is championed for conservation protection by a host of big non-government organizations—insiders call these the BINGOS. These are corporatized entities that have, since the days of Dian Fossey and the notebook-toting-hippies in the forest, professionalized the international monkey business.

These BINGOS have a lock on the aid contracts and control massive programs all around Central Africa. They call them BINGOS because they get all the funding, at the expense of grass-roots programs and little mom-and-pop primate protectors who can't compete with privatization of the rainforest and the international groups that hold it hostage.

We found our little Congolese girl Florence slaving in her fields, tending to goats and maize, carrying a pocket full of bananas, on the lookout for marauding guerillas, while conservation organizations which tout donations to her welfare were nowhere to be seen and, worse still, while millions of USAID dollars dedicated to her welfare remain unaccounted for.

Indeed, this business is slipperier than a banana peel!

During the years of conflict in DRC alone, human rights groups have estimated that tens of thousands of woman and girls have been raped and worse in eastern DRC. Some of the survivors are as young as three years old. Where is the outcry for guardians? Where are their advocates? Have the international human rights defenders and primate *protectionados* lost sight of the people for the forest?

The wards in hospitals in Goma, in Eastern Congo, are packed, with no room to walk between the cots, with woman and children who have been raped, beaten with burning tires, and left to die. Mosquitoes and flies feed on the festering wounds while moans are all that remain of their voices. Who will speak for them?

The Great Apes Project, based in Seattle, supports Hiasl and advocates the right to life, the protection of his "individual liberty," and the "prohibition of torture."

A USAID supported clinic, deep in an all-but-inaccessible part of Congo is denying the right to life and self-determination to the village it serves. The Jane Goodall Foundation and DFGF—and other gorilla groups—accept money from USAID for “community health.”

The BINGOS run these private money shows—did we say money shows? We meant *monkey* shows—out of sight, out of mind, and entirely out of the press. No oversight, no unfortunate explaining to do!

JGI collaborates with the partnership in the development of a Community Centered Conservation (CCC) Program in the Graueri Landscape of eastern Congo. And like the other BINGOs—who are billed in the American press and television shows as wildlife conservators—JGI is also involved in “community health.” Congolese doctors and nurses have told us that this involvement requires convincing the local women—the poorest, most illiterate woman in the world—that they should not be having babies, because having babies is “dangerous to their health.” The doctors have been trained to say this!

Babies lead to more babies, because three out of five will die, and the two that grow up will soon be eating monkeys for survival and sneaking into the land controlled by the BINGOS for primate conservation and international tourism.

How do you conserve primates in the wild? You stop hungry people from trying to keep their children alive. Don’t worry about feeding the people, or selling their resources back to them, or giving them a job in mining the diamonds, gold, coltan or niobium coming out of these areas and into the profits of the mining cartels in America, England, and Vienna.

JGI’s “partnership” with the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International and Conservation International is funding a clinic which tells women that it is dangerous for them to have children, but acceptable to go on an unsupervised regimen of Depo Provera. The Depo comes with all kinds of nasty side-affects, but the nice thing about illiterate black people in Congo is that you don’t have to tell them what they can’t otherwise read. Women gain weight, get infections, have all kinds of hormonal imbalances—and you don’t have to worry about whether or not they will get proper treatment, there’s no equipment to speak of and the local medical facilities promised by the conservation organizations—if they exist at all—are as barren as the women who are choosing permanent sterilization.

This partnership is clearly spelled out in recruiting documents (easily found on the Web) as “a partnership between Conservation International (the Landscape lead organization) and the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International (DFGFI is the implementing partner). JGI collaborates with the partnership in the development of a Community Centered Conservation (CCC) Program in the Graueri Landscape of eastern DRC.” (Employment ad placed by EngenderHealth: Consultant Scope of Work: Support to the Jane Goodall Institute/DRC)

When one woman came back to a clinic complaining that she was getting sicker and sicker, the JGI-trained doctor told us that he told her to go home and “be happy-- it didn’t cost you anything and now you won’t be having children you can’t take care of! If it gets worse, you can always come back.”

So our hormonally imbalanced two-legged but unappreciated primate hopped right in her brand shiny new 4x4 SUV and went home to watch Jeopardy on her TV and wish for her own private utopia... just like the people who work for the international monkey agencies do... right?

Wrong.

The woman from our clinic, indeed, does not have an SUV. She does not even have any shoes. She has one dress, and a basket to haul her manioc, and a hungry family and her grass-thatched hut is a five-mile trek through the bush!

And the condoms at the clinic remain stacked in boxes. The women die of malaria and tuberculosis and malnutrition and diarrhea. Why? Could it be possible that the habitat is being saved for lowland gorillas and chimpanzees?

This is the nouveau conservation, the international outcry for the protection of gorillas, and chimps, and bonobos, and the expropriation of the land, people and resources in Africa. Meanwhile, according to statistics from April 2007, more than 1000 people die every day in the provinces along Congo’s eastern frontier. And so while the popular Viennese primate Hiasl will soon appear in court, the rights of people in Congo remain completely trodden upon.