

## Groups Vie for Space Chimp Colony

A colony of chimpanzees that dates from the dawn of the U.S. space program is the object of a tug-of-war between a biomedical research foundation and animal rights activists. The U.S. Air Force, which owns the colony, no longer has any need for the chimps and is looking for a private outfit to take them over. Three groups are expected to submit proposals by the 3 June deadline, and the outcome of the contest will determine whether the animals will be used for research or be left to live out their lives in a sanctuary.

The colony was established about 40 years ago to help blaze a trail into space for NASA astronauts. In 1961, its most famous member, Ham, was the first of the group to ride a rocket into space. But the Air Force hasn't needed the chimps for research since the early 1970s. Now, the government wants to transfer ownership of the 144 animals to a group with sufficient financial backing and expertise to provide lifelong, quality care.

The current front-runner, say most observers, is the Coulston Foundation, which now cares for the colony at no cost to the government in exchange for the right to use them for research. Most of the animals are housed at Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico. The chimpanzees have been valuable subjects in research on aging and AIDS, says the foundation's Don McKinney, and were crucial in the development of a vaccine for hepatitis that has "saved millions of lives." If the foundation has to give up the Air Force chimps, says McKinney, it will likely breed replacements as needed from among the other 450 chimps it maintains.

But animal rights groups are opposed to further biomedical research on the animals, and they have attacked the Coulston Foundation's record in animal care. Eric Kleiman, a spokesperson for In Defense of Animals, points out that in March, the U.S. Department of Agriculture charged the foundation with violating the Animal Welfare Act for actions that resulted in the 1997 deaths of two chimpanzees. McKinney says the foundation has filed a response contesting the charges. "The chimps [here] are extremely well cared for," he says.

Coulston's chief opponents are two groups that want to free the animals from further research. The Center for Captive Chimpanzee Care, based in Boynton Beach, Florida, has raised \$1.2 million toward the \$13 million it says is needed to build and operate a sanctuary where the chimps could live in half-hectare-sized enclosures. "Even in a good lab, life is hard for a chimp," says primatologist Jane Goodall, who serves on the center's board of directors. "These chimps

have been through enough." Earlier this month Goodall made a pitch for the center's proposal before an audience of senior government officials when she accepted the first-ever Public Service Award from the National Science Foundation.

However, the center's overall philosophy has led some researchers to seek a third option for the space chimps. "I respect all of [Goodall's] work," says Michale Keeling, who oversees the chimpanzee facility at the M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Bastrop, Texas, "but her emphasis has been on chimps in the wild." He says that the animal rights groups that fund the center have shunned people with experience tending a facility for captive animals.

Keeling and others have formed a group called Chimp Haven Inc., in San Antonio, that, he says, has the engineering know-how that Goodall's group lacks. But "it's

been much harder to raise money than we thought" from pharmaceutical companies and a variety of corporate-based foundations, he says. Its attempts to raise money

from sources tied to animal research have also contributed to a split between the two sanctuary groups. "We invited Goodall's group to join, and basically there was a lot of going back and forth and things didn't go anywhere," says Chimp Haven President Linda Brent. Instead, the two groups hope to bid on separate blocs of chimps. The Air Force, however, has said it would prefer to keep the colony intact.

Whichever group takes the chimps will need more than just money and a good heart to deal with the trials

of daily care, warns Sarah Boysen, a primatologist at Ohio State University, Columbus. "Some of these chimps have been in labs for 30 years," she says. "You can give them all the Popsicles and Gummy Bears you like, [but] they're not going to be too thrilled with humans."

—David Kestenbaum



**Patriotic primate.** Air Force seeks new home for Ham's relatives.

## PHILANTHROPY

## Elephantine Gift Stirs Museum Debate

The National Museum of Natural History, the anchor of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., will soon begin spending the largest private donation it has ever received, but some staffers are uneasy about how the gift will be used. The top brass say they want to spend the money—\$20 million, from Kenneth Behring, a real estate developer and former owner of the Seattle Seahawks football team—to clean up the dusty central rotunda, create traveling educational programs, and improve some 40-year-old mammal exhibits. But members of the museum's scientific staff worry that the renovation may result

in the trashing of some cherished old exhibits and the relocation of the huge elephant in the museum's entrance rotunda that serves as the museum's icon.

Museum director Robert Fri, who has been struggling with rising costs and flat revenues, welcomes Behring's generous donation, which he sees as a nice kick-off to an upcoming capital campaign. But he acknowledges that "the donation has set off an intensive discussion" within the staff. Behring has not stipulated precisely how his \$20 million is to be used, nor has the museum released any plans. "We are now transitioning from brainstorming to bringing in a design team," says Fri. Design contracts are to be let soon, he says, and construction is to begin later this year.

But Fri says that "functionally, we know what we want to happen." He hopes to create traveling educational exhibits called "mammals on the move" and "mammals in the schools," in effect, taking the museum to the people. He also says he aims to scrub decades of grime off the "dingy" rotunda—"one of the great public museum spaces in the world"—and replace some exhibits and faded specimens, some dating to the 1930s or earlier. All this is part of an effort to "turn the museum from a simple destination for tourists into a learning hub." His



**Vulnerable icon?** Renovation may displace museum's famous elephant.