

Essay

# The Controversy over the Value of Zoo Animals — Two Stories about Gorillas in a Japanese Zoo and What They Mean —

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## Abstract

The year of 1999 was not a very good year for gorillas in Japan. Two sad and strange stories about captive gorillas in a Tokyo zoo were reported in the mass media. I was involved in this problem as a primate (gorilla) researcher and came to the realization that, in Japan, zoo animals are regarded simply as breeding machines that are easily replaceable by buying other animals. I found it was really difficult to talk with zoo personnel on how to promote the welfare of zoo animals to assure 'quality of life' and respect for 'the dignity' of animals. Why is the understanding of zoo animals by Japanese zoo professionals so different from that of Western countries? Surely this difference needs to be clarified before discussions to change this situation in the future can occur. Clearly, Japanese zoos have not kept up with the times, and it is not only a problem for zoos but also for all Japanese because sympathy for captive animals as the weak is an indication of our attitude toward all living things including humans.

## Introduction

Sympathy for captive animals as the weak is said to relate to our attitude toward all other living things, including humans.

The year of 1999 was not a very good year for gorillas in Japan. Through the mass media, we learned about two sad and strange stories on captive gorillas in Tokyo. These cases clearly showed the miserable situation of wild animals in Japanese zoos. Not only the zoo but also primate researchers were strongly criticized by those concerned in Western countries. Surely it is important for us to discuss how to change this situation from the standpoint of animal welfare. On the other hand, this problem with the gorillas in the zoo may provide clues on the differences in attitudes toward wild animals in captivity between Japanese professionals and those in the West. Since the news was reported, I had exchanges of opinions about this problem every day with people of various nationalities through the internet.

An experience of studying captive gorillas in an American zoo gave me a good opportunity to understand the American people's attitudes toward animals and I must admit that my thoughts on wild animals were somewhat affected by their viewpoint. Living with my pet cat in the United States helped me to understand more readily American people's attitudes. In contrast, when I talk with Japanese zoo staff, I find it difficult

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to understand their views, and there is a difference in some basic understanding of the value of animal life.

In this short report, I try to think about the different viewpoint in reviewing the story about the gorillas in a Japanese zoo in 1999. However before doing so, the details of the stories about the gorillas should be looked at to clarify the points at issue. It may give us clues on how to assure the quality of the lives of zoo animals in Japan.

### The story of gorillas in a Japanese zoo in 1999

#### 1. The self-mutilation of a female

The case of the self-mutilation of a female was reported to the public through news reports (Asahi evening edition, Oct. 21, 1999). They indicated that a 13 yr old female gorilla named GENKI, housed at the Ueno Zoological Gardens in Tokyo, had chewed off the top joint of the small finger of one of her hands [1]. Genki had been born at the Kyoto Zoo and raised by her own mother in her father's group. She was transferred to the Ueno Zoo two years earlier by the breeding program of the Japanese Society of Zoos and Aquariums. According to the reports, Genki also had suffered a drastic weight reduction from 103 kg when she arrived at the Ueno Zoo to her current weight of approximately 60 kg. One explanation for the self-mutilation and weight loss given by the zoo people was that the silverback gorilla, BIJU, who had been bred with Genki previously, had become more interested in other female gorillas who had joined the group at Ueno in July. The staff explained that Genki was experiencing extreme stress due to her reduced position in the hierarchy of the modified gorilla group. They supported this theory with the example of another female in Ueno that had died in 1980, who apparently had also self-mutilated. Genki was returned to the Kyoto Zoo on Oct. 29, 1999. The mass media picked up the story of Genki and her lost love as an easy way for the general public to understand such aberrant behavior (self-mutilation). However scientific understanding of gorilla dynamics in captivity and in the wild indicates that such an explanation is simplistic, at best.

#### 2. The death of a young male

The death of a young male was reported by the TV crew that visited Ueno Zoo to take VTR's of Genki's last day in Tokyo. A young silverback (an adult male gorilla is called a silverback) named Biju (12 years old) died at the Ueno Zoo on Oct. 29, 1999. He had been brought to Japan for breeding purposes from the Howletts Zoo in England, the world's largest and most successful gorilla colony, with the understanding and hope that Japan would develop some zoos that specialized in the breeding of gorillas, building appropriate facilities for them. The cause of death was reported as a 'heart attack' in the newspapers (after the autopsy, it was changed to 'death from suffocation'). TV reports showed Biju dying, which was a shocking spectacle for the public to witness. Ueno Zoo described his death as sudden, despite the fact that Biju had, like Genki, also experienced dramatic weight loss several months earlier.

#### 3. The responses from the world

These facts were quickly disseminated all over the world on the internet, and I got many responses from experts in foreign countries. Experts, including gorilla keepers, curators, zoo directors, researchers, etc. from around the world, expressed their concern for the welfare of gorillas in Japan, given the tragedies of Biju's death and Genki's suffering, and the contrasting statements made by Ueno Zoo officials in explaining these situations to the public.

Questions raised by foreign experts included: why were the drastic weight losses of these gorillas treated so irresponsibly? Why didn't the staff give the gorilla proper care to stop the self-mutilation, since the zoo had experienced the same problem previously? The competency of the veterinary and maintenance staff, as well as zoo management, has been called into question. It appears to many that the individuality of gorillas has not been considered, and the husbandry techniques are questionable. Furthermore, despite

the characterization of Biju's death as sudden by zoo officials, it seems clear that he had been in great distress since February 1999, several months before he finally died. The circumstances of gorillas in Japan has now drawn the attention of the world. In Europe and North America, successful breeding and husbandry techniques have long been established, and the advice of many gorilla experts is readily available, if Japanese zoo officials are willing to listen to and heed their advice. The dismal record of the maintenance and breeding of gorillas in Japan is brought to light. Biju was sent to Ueno by the Howletts Zoo. Now that Biju has died and Genki has suffered so needlessly, people around the world are wondering why any more breeding animals should ever be sent to Japan.

#### 4. The statements from researchers in Japan

Japanese researchers and scientists, including the author, thought something had to be done to show the world that (1) we understood and regretted the mistakes that had been made and (2) we were open to the advice of others so we would not make the same mistakes again. As of November 1999, there were 35 gorillas in Japan, which was an average of 2 gorillas in each zoo. This is an appalling statistic known about gorilla life styles, both in the wild and in successful captive situations around the world. Gorillas are not the property of zoos for the delight of zoo visitors. They should be treated with dignity and given as much freedom as possible in the captive situation. In accordance with this view, on November 27, 1999, we sent the following statement to the Japanese Society of Zoos and Aquariums to express our determination and concern: we must all work together to help improve our understanding and treatment of gorillas, and increase public awareness about their plight in the wild, as well as in captivity. We encourage zoos and researchers to join in a concerted effort to take advantage of the advice and proven experience of foreign experts in the maintenance and breeding of gorillas. Since the Japanese public knows so little about gorillas in the first place, it should be the responsibility of zoos to provide accurate and proper explanations about gorilla behavior, and not fabricate silly stories which only end up making Japanese zoos and researchers look silly to the world.

#### 5. The responses from Japanese zoo professionals

We have not yet had an official direct response from zoo professionals in Japan as of June 2000. However, they have published two reports since the death of Biju. One was published in a Japanese popular science magazine [2]. It presented a one-sided interpretation of the social relationships among gorillas in Ueno without any scientific data. Both the self-mutilation of Genki and the death of Biju were purported to be caused by the individual character of each gorilla. The second was a very short report in a zoo magazine announcing the death of Biju and claiming that the techniques for maintaining gorillas had been firmly established over a period of more than 40 years [3].

Biju's legacy may live on, since the zoo has informed the public that one of the females he mated with is now pregnant \* . This news was reported on TV as if the pregnancy was proof that their techniques were correct and working well. However, the future of mother and baby is questionable unless better husbandry techniques are employed by the zoo staff. There is increasing concern for the welfare of gorillas in Japan from various experts, including societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals around the world.

\* This female named MOMOKO gave birth on July 3, 2000.

#### The background to understand the captive gorilla problem

The background of this fiasco should be clarified. It is difficult to understand the essence of this problem without some knowledge about the different situations of captive gorillas in the world. This was explained in a Japanese editorial which was published by the author in December 1999 [4]. I would like to present the essence of that editorial in English at this time.

The Gorilla is one of the species of great apes, the nearest relatives of human beings, and lives on vegetation in the tropical forests of Africa. It is the Western Lowland Gorilla (*gorilla gorilla gorilla*), one of the five sub-species of gorillas, that is found in zoos. The basis of their society is a family group composed of an adult male called a silverback, his females, and their infants. They are one of the endangered species, and trading in wild animals is prohibited by the Washington treaty. For 40 years or more, zoos in many countries have developed breeding programs. As a result of these efforts, success has been achieved and the coming generation of babies has been born in Western countries. The techniques for maintaining gorillas in captivity have also been established by studying their behavior in the wild.

In the United States, basic procedures include the following: social groupings are maintained (more than 3 gorillas live together as a group), the enclosure used by the animals incorporates three-dimensional space, many toys are provided, and improved feeding techniques are used (various kinds of food, various ways for feeding, etc.). These methods are considered to be minimum standards for maintaining the quality of life of captive gorillas and efforts for further improvements are continuing. Such effort is called 'environmental enrichment'. In July 1999, the USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service) published a final report on the psychological well-being of captive primates, and AAZK (The American Association of Zoo Keepers) published the second edition of 'Enrichment notebook' in the fall of 1999. Some zoos have 'guidelines' detailing the minimum requirements for caring for wild animals. It is really a pleasure to see wild animals whose 'quality of life' is assured as a result of the respect and gratitude afforded to the guests from the wild.

On the contrary, the situation of gorillas in Japan is miserable. Thirty three gorillas\*\* are kept separately in 15 zoos. There are only a few zoos that have a 'group' of gorillas consisting of a silverback and a few females, which is the normal situation in the wild. Ten males live alone and there are 7 male-female pairs. As the gorilla is known to be one of the most socialized animals, the situation of gorillas in Japanese zoos is the worst among advanced nations.

Efforts to improve this situation have been made in the 1990s. For a long time, Japanese zoos did not approve of having their gorillas move to other zoos because all animals belonging to each zoo are considered to be 'the property' of the zoo owner. For example, in the Tokyo municipal government budget, the live animals kept in the public zoos in Tokyo are considered to be 'equipments', the same as fixtures. Every zoo tries to keep its animals for fear of losing property. But recently, facing with the danger of the extinction of gorillas in Japan, some zoos began exchanging gorillas to develop breeding programs and the formation of gorilla groups. Four males and two females have lost their lives and a female has broken her arm twice since the breeding program started. Advancing age means that there are only a few young females who have the capability to breed. This is one of the reasons that the breeding program is said to be a thoughtless plan since even the simplest techniques for keeping gorillas in a healthy state are lacking. Even though a baby is born in Japan, there are no family groups in which it could be brought up in a normal way. The organization of Japanese zoos is too closed to permit the formation of groups according to the scientific understanding of gorilla behavior.

To this day, the old customs of the past when keepers were traditional caretakers of animals are still alive, and there is resistance to the opinions of outsiders, such as researchers and zoo experts from other countries. The local/national governments also do not actively participate to improve the situation. Although the cost of keeping animals in public zoos is funded by taxes, the general public has no way to know what is happening to the animals until the condition of the animals becomes bad enough to be reported by the media. Also, researchers are not informed of the facts about animals. As long as the information about gorillas in Japan is closed to the public, and the data is not made available to other professionals, their sufferings will continue.

With the deterioration of the global environment, wild animals in zoos are considered to be public treasures that are to be passed on to the next generation. In this respect, Japan is criticized internationally as the nation whose people do not feel compassion for abused gorillas. The zoos should disclose information, including the scientific data about gorillas, and make efforts to improve the terrible situation. Consideration for animals leads to consideration for other humans. Now, our commitment toward life is no longer trusted in the international community.

\*\*Since one adult female died on March 5, 2000 after this editorial was published, the number of gorillas in Japan was 32 until Momoko gave birth on July 3, 2000.

### How to bridge the deep gap

Since Biju's death, I received information through various channels and concluded that most of the troubles between Japanese zoo staff and people who love gorillas, including professionals in Western countries, are the result of a fundamental difference in the understanding of the value of wild animals in captivity. Japanese zoo staff said that the self-mutilation by the female was caused by her own strange character, and that Biju had died from existing health problems, in spite of the staff's good care; plenty of food, clean rooms, etc. They also stated that the main object of keeping gorillas was for breeding purposes and that the breeding programs gave value to zoo animals and should take priority over all else, even the quality of life. Their quality of life has been ignored, in spite of the fact that gorillas can not live for sex alone, just as humans cannot. They did not even mention the responsibilities that humans who care for animals have. They strongly insisted that there were no reasons at all for them to be criticized as if they had 'abused' the animals. The essence of their beliefs about animals can be seen here, and it is an interesting clue to the Japanese perspective toward animals. This subject will be discussed at a future time due to lack of space here.

I have observed captive apes in Japanese zoos for more than 10 years and was taught many things by Japanese keepers. Even now, I respect some of the old keepers as great professionals, though most of them have already retired. Without a doubt, I would have agreed with their opinions if I had not been exposed to wild animals in American Zoos. As a researcher of animal social behavior, it was a pleasure for me to see animals living under better conditions, and the condition of animals in zoos in the States was clearly much better than that in Japan. The wild animals in some American Zoos were just as beautiful as the wild chimpanzees I had studied in Tanzania. I learned the truth about wild animal life there and am sure that I have been following the wrong theories used in Japanese zoos for a long time. Though the keepers said they loved animals very much and I cannot deny the fact that they believed so, I noticed that the animals could have led a much more comfortable life if they had been loved in a different way. At this point, I had to say good-bye to the Japanese zoo society, where I led such a large part of my life as a researcher.

The problem is that we cannot communicate well with each other, even though we speak the same language. They see/listen to what they want to see/listen to. The staff in zoos in Tokyo obstinately believe that they are the best and that all mistakes are caused, not by humans, but by stupid animals. It was really difficult to talk with them about contributing to the welfare of zoo animals to assure 'quality of life' and respect for 'the dignity' of animals, even after they were shown scientific data. And furthermore it is painful to admit this. I sometimes could not help feeling that, for them, the animal may be just a breeding machine, which can be easily replaced by buying other animals.

For Western zoo people, this situation in Japan is difficult to understand. They insist that caretakers should take total responsibility for captive animals, including the assurance of their quality of life and

the enrichment of their lives, since it was humans who forced wild animals to live in captivity. They also believe that zoo animals have to be respected as guests from the wild, whether they breed or not. They could not even imagine that there were zoo keepers who cared only about breeding without consideration for the animals' quality of life.

There is such a deep gap between Japanese methods and those of the rest of the world. As a person who has experienced zoos in both Japan and the USA, I began to think it my duty to bridge the gap between them for the sake of the animals. It is possible to refute Japanese zoo people's opinions scientifically, but it does not solve the basic problem. Though it is clear that Japanese zoos have not kept up with the times, it is not a problem for zoos alone but also for all Japanese. There are many in the general public who are not keen on visiting zoos because they do not wish to see the "poor" animals. Such feelings should not be ignored and I think such a fundamental feeling toward animals can be the means to change the present situation, regardless of the cultural differences between East and West. We can feel joy in seeing happy animals. This is a very important feeling that cannot and should not be forgotten, although people may quickly forget the tragedy of the gorillas in Japan.

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