

Chimpanzoo

at Johannesburg Zoo



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Chimpanzoo is a research initiative that was started in 1984 by the Jane Goodall Institute (JGI) aimed at studying chimpanzees in zoos and other captive settings. The project is run by volunteers, researchers, students and caretakers, all of whom contribute data to a growing international database of chimpanzee behaviour, maintained by JGI. The project is run all over the world, with behaviour research being conducted on approximately 130 chimps at participating zoos and other captive institutions.

Under the mandate of JGI, and in collaboration with the University of the Witwatersrand and the Johannesburg Zoo, the Chimpanzoo project extended to South Africa for the first time in 2006. I began the project as part of my Masters research in animal behaviour. The research is being funded by JGI (who received funding from Howard Buffer Foundation for this specific project) and has two aspects to it. Firstly, it aims at introducing behavioural enrichment. This means placing feeding devices in the chimpanzee's enclosure aimed at occupying the chimpanzees for longer, while encouraging the animals to utilize areas of their enclosure that they don't use that frequently. Secondly, the study investigates the merit of using high school student volunteers for the collection of behaviour data. The project also uses volunteers from JGI's Roots and Shoots organisation; an environmental education program that aims to create awareness in young Africans about environmental and conservation issues.

Two Johannesburg high schools were selected, from which volunteers could be chosen to participate in this exciting initiative. The 18 volunteers were selected from both Northcliff High School and Beaulieu College and were all between the ages of 16 and 17 years. Once the selection was finalised, the first Chimpanzoo seminar was held on Saturday, 26 August 2006.

The Chimpanzoo volunteers practising their behaviour observation.



Photo © Helen Place

The seminar was hosted at the Johannesburg Zoo, by Professor Neville Pillay, of the University of the Witwatersrand, and myself. This first seminar was attended by the volunteers from Northcliff High School and was aimed at informing them about the project and their role in the data collection. The seminar began with a talk from Professor Pillay about scientific research and the nature of animal behaviour studies. The volunteers were very enthusiastic and participated readily.

After a short break and some time for the volunteers to get to know one another, I gave a talk on the project itself and how it would all be carried out. I explained what they would be doing with the project and exactly

Joyce, one of the youngsters in the group, playing on part of the rope system set up for the chimpanzees in their enclosure.



Photo © Sarah Richmond

The volunteers have proven to be incredibly bright and have caught on to the job required of them without hesitation. Their enthusiasm is also a great encouragement and I anticipate that they will fulfil their role as Chimpanzoo data collectors.

As part of the Chimpanzoo project, the volunteers were asked, at a later stage, to write a poem, essay or draw a picture that would express how they felt about the project. The responses were nothing short of overwhelming. They expressed a great appreciation to JGI for including them in the project and to Prof. Pillay for going to speak to them about the project. They were also thrilled to have been given the opportunity to be involved in a project that will make a difference in the way that animals will be cared for in captive environments. However, this is not the only benefit that Chimpanzoo will bring in its wake.

The project will undoubtedly contribute to our understanding of the behaviour of chimpanzees in captivity, but it will also contribute to our understanding of both the physical and psychological needs of these animals. The information gained from this research will be added to the Chimpanzoo database, for researchers from all over the globe to access. It will also contribute to the growing scientific literature on the behaviour of animals in captivity.

The project will not only benefit science. It will highlight key issues in the welfare of the chimpanzees, and from it, recommendations may be drawn with regard to solutions to these issues. The volunteers stand to benefit through coming to a better understanding of scientific research as well as gaining knowledge both in the research field and in the husbandry of apes in zoos. Undoubtedly, the Johannesburg Zoo and JGI will receive exposure for their involvement in this initiative, as will the University of the Witwatersrand, and more importantly, their contribution to the welfare, upkeep and conservation of a species that while so similar to humans, teeters on the brink of becoming seriously endangered. ♦

how we, working together, were going to contribute to the current understanding of chimpanzees in captive environments. I also explained how they would be systematically documenting the behaviour and space use of the chimpanzees with data sheets. These sheets are made of a table with different behaviours and a time scale. Through this it's possible to record what behaviour the animals are performing at regular time intervals. To look at the space use of the animals, the enclosure was divided into zones, so each volunteer was given a map of the enclosure and the volunteers also record this on their sheets.

Once my talk was over, we went to the chimpanzee exhibit to practice this. The volunteers were broken up into groups of two or three and, with me shouting for them to sample at the appropriate times, they gave it a try. After 10 minutes of sampling, the volunteers were done, and many of them remarked that they had really enjoyed it!

A second Chimpanzoo seminar was hosted in September 2006 at which both Prof. Pillay and I gave our talks again as a refresher for the volunteers. This time, however, both high schools' students attended. At this second seminar, the volunteers received Chimpanzoo t-shirts as well as all the material that they would need to carry out the chimpanzee behaviour observations for the project, including clipboards, pens, drawing pads and writing pads. The enthusiasm at the second seminar was just as evident as at the first and the volunteers were very keen to get started.

For general information on Chimpanzoo please visit www.chimpanzoo.org

For more information on Chimpanzoo at Johannesburg Zoo please visit www.janegoodall.co.za

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