

<LETTERS TO EDITOR>

The Hominid Rights.

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We are writing on behalf of the Great Ape Project New Zealand Inc. to invite your support for a scientists' initiative to elevate the legal status of nonhuman hominids. You may already have heard or read about in the media, on the Internet, or in Science or New Scientist.

THE HOMINID RIGHTS amendment was proposed by a coalition of scientists, philosophers and lawyers in submissions on New Zealand's new Animal Welfare Bill. The submitters have called for an extra section to be inserted in the new Bill giving chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orang-utans fundamental legal rights similar to those held by young children and handicapped adults.

If successful, the proposal could revolutionise the way great apes are seen and treated. The three proposed rights are:

- (1) the right to not be deprived of life;
- (2) the right to not be tortured or treated in cruel or degrading ways;
- and
- (3) the right to not be used in experiments that, in a court's opinion, would not be in their best interests.

A RIGHT TO LIBERTY is not sought in the proposal because, outside their natural environment, non-human hominids, like small children, lack the rationality to exercise freedom safely and responsibly. Liberty is thus a relative term and difficult to apply without suitably designed sanctuaries, which New Zealand is not currently in a position to provide.

EXPERIMENTATION on hominids is not barred by the proposal, provided it meets the

same legal and ethical standards applying to research on humans. The phrase "not in their best interests" is used in child welfare legislation in New Zealand to mean harmful or detrimental to the child's welfare. In essence, this requires experiments on all hominids to be designed as if the subjects were human children.

GUARDIANSHIP provisions in the proposal allow the court to approve guardians for individual hominids. Their role is to monitor, defend and, where necessary, litigate on behalf of hominids whose rights have been violated or threatened.

THE KEY PROPONENTS of the hominid rights proposal are:

- (1) a coalition of three dozen New Zealand biologists, psychologists and philosophers headed by Professor David Penny of Massey University (D.Penny@massey.ac.nz). Dr. Penny is a theoretical biologist specialising in molecular evolution and philosophy of science, and is also a former president of the New Zealand Association of Scientists (NZAS);
- (2) Dr. Roger Fouts of Central Washington University's Chimpanzee-Human Communication Institute (foutsr@cwu.edu); and
- (3) the Great Ape Project NZ Inc (leonard@tui.lincoln.ac.nz), whose president is geneticist, Dr. Liz Watson.

New Zealand's Association of Social Anthropologists has also publicly endorsed the proposal through its president, Dr. Jeff Sluka of Massey University (J.Sluka@massey.ac.nz).

Although New Zealand has only a few dozen great apes, we believe that achieving legal standing for them may help spur similar developments in other countries. A show of international scientific support at this time would help us to emphasise the global aspect when lobbying New Zealand's parliament.

OUR REQUEST IS THIS: If any readers support the Hominid Rights proposal as outlined here, they are invited to post, fax, or e-mail us a support message that will be used as evidence of inter-national scientific support for the concept. Your message may be as short as three sentences or as long as an essay. But please remember to

include a summary of your professional background.

PLEASE NOTE: The concept of animal rights in general is not popular in New Zealand, but most people are prepared to make an exception for the great apes because of their cognitive, emotional and biological closeness to human children, who already have rights, and because there are no vested economic interests in their abuse and exploitation. It is therefore advisable to confine any comments about extending rights to just the hominid family.

Thank you for considering this request.
