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## US research chimps savour retirement at new home

For the first time in their lives, four aging chimpanzees once used in U.S. government research can go outside whenever they like. They can lie on the grass, clamber onto a platform on a chimp-style jungle gym and gaze freely at the open sky, the vista unbroken by steel bars.

Fifty-two-year-olds Julius and Sandy, 46-year-old Phyllis and 44-year-old Jessica have arrived. These and several other primates are now "living like chimpanzees" as they play, groom each other and tussle at Chimp Haven in Louisiana — the only national sanctuary for retired federal research chimps.

Julius' group is among 111 chimpanzees coming to Chimp Haven over the next 18 months from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's New Iberia Research Centre. They could be the vanguard of a much larger immigration of former research chimps.

A National Institutes of Health committee recommended Jan. 22 that most of the other 350 federally owned research chimpanzees be retired to "the federal sanctuary system" — a system of one.

The proposal to retire all but about 50 federally owned chimpanzees is the latest step in a gradual shift away from using chimps as test subjects, owing to technological advances and growing ethical concerns about research on primates that share more than 98 percent of the DNA of humans.

Research on the chimps has ranged from psychological studies to trying to develop vaccines for HIV and hepatitis.

The Chimp Haven newcomers led by Julius were among nine that arrived Jan. 22. Another seven arrived later that week and eight more Tuesday.

New arrivals spend 17 days in quarantine before being moved into an indoor bedroom area near a bedroom occupied by chimps already settled into the sanctuary, to see how they get along.

Staffers say it's amazing to see them savour new freedoms.

"They light up, look up at the sky, look at us watching them," behaviourist Amy Fultz said.



A mother chimp relaxes with her baby. APphoto

Like most newcomers to Chimp Haven, Julius' group first explored the edges of its new surroundings. Their play yards are surrounded by a high concrete wall that can't be climbed.

Chimps in the wild make regular perimeter patrols, alert for any encroaching bands and for a chance to expand their own territory.

These retirees will spend the rest of their lives at the sanctuary in a forested park belonging to the Caddo Parish government, which donated the land to Chimp Haven.

The 111 incoming chimps include a total of eight youngsters; one was born to a female chimp with HIV.

On Tuesday, Conan's crowd was in a play area, catching fruit thrown by staffers. A female named Sheila slapped her hands together and then held up an arm to attract attention.

A few minutes' walk away, another group of 15 chimps raced from the steel mesh tunnel between their sleeping area and a forested habitat toward an array of fruits and vegetables strewn on the ground.

Indoor bedrooms, furnished with straw and blankets for making nests, and old fire hose for climbing, have steel mesh interior walls to keep chimps in.

Chimps with HIV, hepatitis or other major medical or psychological problems have outdoor areas surrounded by the same wide, heavy steel mesh. The peaked ceilings are of pipes laid a few inches apart from each other so the chimps can swing across the ceiling arm over arm, as they might in trees.

"Those spaces are huge. They're huge," said Lori Gruen, a Wesleyan University philosophy professor who specializes in animal ethics. Chimp Haven is "a pretty remarkable facility. I think it will be quite interesting and exciting to see it expand."

But there's a major hurdle. When Chimp Haven was made the national sanctuary in 2002, Congress capped spending on the project at \$30 million. That cap will be hit this year.

U.S. Rep. John Fleming, a Republican representing northwest Louisiana, said in a statement that any additional federal spending "will be difficult" in the current budget climate of mounting federal debt and ongoing national security priorities.

Kathleen Conlee, vice president for animal research issues of the Humane Society of the United States, and other advocates say there's no need for additional spending if Congress would let NIH put money now spent on research contracts into the animals' retirement.

With help from the Humane Society and other nonprofit groups, the sanctuary has in recent months raised \$2.6 million needed to add bedrooms, six play yards and an open-air enclosure to accommodate all 111 federal chimps coming from New Iberia and another \$100,000 toward a total \$5.1 million goal announced in November.

"We certainly expect and hope the cap will be extended," said Cathy Willis Spraez, who became president of Chimp Haven three weeks ago.

If it isn't? "Then we have to rely on our wonderful donors," she said. ©ap