

# THE GREAT APE DECLARATION

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**T**he Great Ape Project is dedicated to securing legal and moral rights for certain species of primates. The core principles of the Great Apes Declaration Group are set out in its declaration:

## DECLARATION ON GREAT APES<sup>1</sup>

We demand the extension of the community of equals to include all great apes: human beings, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans. The "community of equals" is the moral community within which we accept certain basic moral principles or rights as governing our relations with each other and enforceable at law. Among these principles or rights are the following:

1. The Right to Life

The lives of members of the community of equals are to be protected. Members of the community of equals may not be killed except in very strictly defined circumstances, for example, self-defence.

2. The Protection of Individual Liberty

Members of the community of equals are not to be arbitrarily deprived of their liberty; if they should be imprisoned without due legal process, they have the right to immediate release. The detention of those who have not been convicted of

any crime, or of those who are not criminally liable, should be allowed only where it can be shown to be for their own good, or necessary to protect the public from a member of the community who would clearly be a danger to others if at liberty. In such cases, members of the community of equals must have the right to appeal, either directly or, if they lack the relevant capacity, through an advocate, to a judicial tribunal.

### 3. The Prohibition of Torture

The deliberate infliction of severe pain on a member of the community of equals, either wantonly or for an alleged benefit to others, is regarded as torture, and is wrong.

## ABOUT THE GREAT APE PROJECT

Anyone who indicates their endorsement of the Declaration on Great Apes can become a supporter of the organization, which takes the Anti-Slavery Society as its political model. We already have supporters in more than twenty nations. We will start operating at a national level in as many countries as possible. Activities range from public education, to campaigning, to the adoption of individual imprisoned non-human great apes. From small-scale, local interventions, we will work up towards an international level, so as to bring about a momentous but well-grounded change in the status of chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans.

Our long-term goal is a United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Great Apes. When this historic result has been achieved, we will advocate the setting up of guarded territories so that chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans can continue to live as free beings in their own ways.

## DISCUSSION

The Great Ape Project does not seek to obtain protection for all primates but only for the four "great apes": gorillas, orangutans, chimpanzees, and bonobos. The project defends this focus and explains its strategic importance as follows:

The Great Ape Project is not seeking to move the species barrier simply to re-erect it in another place, but to demolish it altogether. . . . The Great Ape Project is arguing for the inclusion of our fellow great apes in the "community of equals" . . . because they possess a variety of characteristics which are morally

relevant . . . such as complex emotional life, strong social and family bonds, and self-awareness. . . .

But why just the great apes? Because we need to start somewhere. . . . The Great Ape Project focuses on great apes not because they are the only morally considerable animals, but rather because their rich individuality, combined with their dire predicament, makes them one of the most obvious cases for challenging the claim that membership of the human species is the only basis for moral standing. . . . [The Great Ape Project] cannot ignore the specific structures and mechanisms of the real world if it wants to make practical moral progress. . . . [We] are demanding the three most basic rights that all humans possess—but, for this very reason, we have to limit the range of those for whom we are demanding so much. This has led us away from the traditional attitude of asking for a little for all towards one of asking everything for some. This goal, being revolutionary rather than reformist in nature, will establish a precedent for many other animals.<sup>2</sup>

New Zealand has recently incorporated some of the precepts of the Great Ape Project into an animal welfare law. Section 85 of the Animal Welfare Act of 1999 allows research or testing on a primate only if the following can be shown:

- (a) That the use of the non-human hominid in the research, testing, or teaching is in the best interests of the non-human hominid; or
- (b) That the use of the non-human hominid in the research, testing, or teaching is in the interests of the species to which the non-human hominid belongs and that the benefits to be derived from the use of the non-human hominid in the research, testing, or teaching are not outweighed by the likely harm to the non-human hominid.<sup>3</sup>

Opponents of the law argued that primates, and particularly chimpanzees, are important to medical researchers and that the law would retard necessary medical research. To this objection, the Great Ape Project replies that the same *similarity to humans*, which makes the great apes such useful research subjects, should entitle them to the same ethical and legal protection that we give to members of our own species.

## QUESTIONS

1. Is the “species line” that the Great Ape Project has drawn morally justifiable? Where *should* we draw the line demarcating those entities

entitled to legal and moral rights from those not so entitled? Whether or not the line is based on species membership, should it be based on genetic, psychological, or cognitive criteria? If so, on what criteria? Should it, as many animal rights theorists argue, be based simply on an ability to feel pain?

2. Even if the Great Ape Project's focus on four species is not theoretically justified—as, indeed, the project comes close to conceding in its FAQs (frequently asked questions)—is it morally justified by tactical and political considerations?
3. Is it morally correct, as the Great Ape Project asserts, that it is better to demand full moral rights for members of a few species than to seek more modest gains for members of many species?
4. Is being morally considerable (or “having moral standing” or “being intrinsically valuable”) an all-or-nothing kind of property? Much of the philosophical literature on the question assumes that it is.<sup>4</sup> But at least in the West, much of the theological literature assumes that it is not. Muslims, Jews, and Christians would all argue that everything God has created is good and deserves respect and moral consideration but not that it is *equally* good and deserving of *equal* respect and consideration (see Case 39: Peace with All of Creation). Assuming that humans have “full” moral standing, can a snail or a dog or a gorilla have only *no* standing or *full* standing? Or could each have its own unique degree of standing? To oversimplify the question, who is right: the philosophers or the theologians?
5. Reread question 2 from Case 1: Gorilla Rangers. If you were one of the impoverished human refugees struggling to survive along the Congo–Uganda–Rwanda border, would the Great Ape Project's focus on legal and moral rights for animals seem important to you?

## NOTES

1. The Great Ape Declaration and other information on the Great Ape Project are available at [www.greatapeproject.org/gapintroduction.html](http://www.greatapeproject.org/gapintroduction.html).

2. The Great Ape Project, “Frequently Asked Questions,” section 4.1, available at [www.greatapeproject.org/gapfaq.html](http://www.greatapeproject.org/gapfaq.html).

3. *Animal Welfare Act*, 1999 (N.Z.).

4. Mary Anne Warren is one of many notable exceptions and has offered a sharp critique of the view that whatever possess inherent value must possess it equally. See

her "Difficulties with the Strong Animal Rights Position," *Between the Species* 2, no. 4 (fall 1978): 433-41.

## SOURCES

*Animal Welfare Act*, 1999 (N.Z.).

The Great Ape Project. [www.greatapeproject.org](http://www.greatapeproject.org).

Warren, Mary Anne. "Difficulties with the Strong Animal Rights Position." *Between the Species* 2, no. 4 (fall 1978): 433-41.