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Putting primates on screen is fuelling the illegal pet trade

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War for the Planet of the Apes used no real primates. Twentieth Century Fox

Why would animal rights organisation PETA praise a film in which a group of apes are brutally attacked by humans? The answer is that War for the Planet of the Apes, the most recent movie in the franchise, used no real primates in its filming.

Yet while computer generated imagery is now good enough to create realistic looking animals on screen, some movies still employ actual non-human primates. In the last few years, primate actors have been used in major Hollywood films such as The Hangover Part II (2011), The Wolf of Wall Street (2013) and Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales (2017).

Regardless of how these animals are treated on set, the reality is that they're being placed in unnatural environments and made to act for other people's amusement against their will. What's more, there's evidence that using real primates on screen actually encourages the illegal pet trade. It's estimated that more than 3,000 great apes and hundreds of thousands of other primates are traded as pets and bush meat each year.

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A recent study of films released between 1990 and 2013 found 70 movies in which primate actors appeared. Chimpanzees, capuchins and old-world monkeys were the most commonly used animals. The study found that more than half the time they were shown among people, dressed up and performing human actions. It also found that primates on screen were “smiling” 19% of the time, something that primatologists widely recognise as an expression of fear or submission.

Using primate actors was just as common at the end of the time period studied, even though much more had been learned about the complex welfare needs of these animals. The study concluded that using primates in film-making compromised their welfare by removing them from their social groups, training them to perform unnatural actions, and denying them the opportunity to behave naturally. All of these things have lasting negative psychological and physical effects on primates.



Putting chimps to work affects how we see them. Wikimedia/CBS Television Network

The research also showed that using primates in films made people think the animals were less endangered than they really were, something backed up by a number of other studies. For example, one paper from 2008 surveyed members of the public and found 95% of respondents thought gorillas were endangered, 91% perceived orangutans to be endangered, but only 66% believed that chimpanzees were endangered. The specific survey responses suggested that this was because chimpanzees are often seen in films and TV programmes and their images often appear on comical greeting cards and in advertisements.

The participants in that research were also shown videos of chimpanzees in their natural environment and in unnatural situations, such as dancing to music or working in an office. Those who watched the

unnatural videos were more likely to think it was acceptable to own a pet chimp and less likely to think the animal was endangered. This was echoed by a **2011 study** that just seeing a photo of a chimp and a human together, as opposed to a chimp on its own, increased the probability of participants wanting the animal as a pet.

Further research from **2015** analysed comments from viewers after watching a YouTube video of a human tickling a **slow loris**. They found **25%** of viewers wanted to keep a slow loris as a pet, but when information about their conservation crisis was added, this dropped to **10%**. Although the human owner may have thought the slow loris enjoyed being tickled, the primate was raising their arms to activate their defence venom.

Traumatic treatment

From this evidence, we can see how portraying primates as human caricatures in the media fuels demand for them as pets. The illegal pet trade sees wild infant primates **taken from their highly protective mothers** soon after birth. Poachers will often kill the adults as they fight to protect the infant from being taken. The adults are sold as bush meat at local markets and the infants sold illegally as pets.

These traumatised infants, who would normally spend up to five years with their mothers living in complex social groups, are deprived of normal development by their human carers. It's increasingly common for primate owners to share videos of their "pets" on social media being clothed, bathed, fed inappropriate diets and forced to interact with domesticated animals such as dogs.

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Pet primates are also often permanently harmed to make them “safer” for their human owners. For example, pygmy marmosets (also known as finger monkeys), the most trafficked primate species after squirrel monkeys, live in the Amazon rain forest and have sharp teeth to drain sap from trees. Pet traders will often remove the monkeys’ sharp teeth to prevent potential owners from getting bitten. Shockingly, it is not illegal to own one of these primates in the UK – and owners are often unaware of how and where their pets were obtained.

Exploiting wild primates for entertainment must be stopped. The evidence suggests that using these animals in film-making, especially when they're so often portrayed as human companions and caricatures, only adds to the demand for their part in the brutal illegal pet trade.

The Planet of the Apes series and other films have proven that animatronics and computer graphics offer a realistic substitute for the use of primate actors. But there is still concern that portraying primates, whether real or robotic, with humans and in unnatural situations gives the dangerous impression that they make suitable pets.

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