

Love beckons for recovering chimp in Brazil refuge

August 21 2017, by Rosa Sulleiro



Chimpanzees play at the Great Apes Project (GAP), a sanctuary for apes in Sorocaba, some 100km west of Sao Paulo, Brazil

Marcelino is calling to her, but Cecilia cannot be with him. Not yet. He may be handsome, but she has suffered a lot and isn't ready for a relationship.

This is not a soap opera. It is just the way things go in a Brazilian refuge

for abused and depressed chimpanzees.

Cecilia, 20, sits on a rooftop and gazes wistfully around—perhaps remembering her childhood spent in a cramped zoo, or her two friends who died there.

Luckily she is now in the best place to have her depression treated: the Sorocaba Great Primates Sanctuary.

She is alone in her enclosure, but with toys and plenty of space, it beats being in a zoo. And her carers say she is slowly getting better.

Legal chimp precedent

Cecilia came to Sorocaba four months ago from Mendoza in Argentina, after making legal history in a case brought by animal rights' groups.

The judge ruled that Cecilia was being held in unsuitable conditions at the Mendoza zoo and should be transferred to this sanctuary near Sao Paulo.

In her ruling, the judge defined Cecilia as "a non-human subject of law." Though she is a [chimp](#), the law applied to her as it would to a person.

Experts say she was the first ape ever to be transferred to a sanctuary under such a legal ruling.



Pedro Ynterian, the director of the Great Apes Project (GAP), stands next to a chimpanzee at a sanctuary for apes in Sorocaba, some 100km west of Sao Paulo, Brazil

Lonely apes' club

Cecilia had spent her whole life in the zoo, deprived of the benefits of roaming free in the wild.

Above all, she was lonely: heartbroken by the deaths of Charly and Xuxa, her two lifetime chimp companions.

"When she arrived here she had no physical problems but she was very depressed," says Camila Gentile, a veterinary at the sanctuary.

"She used to spend all her time lying down and did not interact with

anyone."

Now Cecilia is starting to eat better and even looks over and replies when Marcelino calls to her from his nearby enclosure, as she sits on her perch.

Talking cure

In Sorocaba, Cecilia shares a 500,000-square-meter refuge of trees, grass and enclosures with about 50 other chimps, as well as hundreds of other animals such as lions and bears.

A staff of 30 tend to them. Some of the apes receive medication to stop them mutilating themselves. But they also benefit from emotional support.

"It is very important to talk to them so they don't feel lonely," says Merivan Miranda, one of the carers.

"So that they know there is someone there who understands them."



A female chimpanzee holds her baby at the Great Apes Project (GAP), a sanctuary for apes in Sorocaba, some 100km west of Sao Paulo, Brazil

Unique chimp sanctuary

One of the chimps, Dolores, 18, sits shrieking on her perch: the mental effect of years of mistreatment in a zoo.

Another, Jango, gives a broad but toothless smile when the director of the sanctuary, Pedro Ynterian, approaches.

The zookeepers who used to own Jango castrated him and pulled his teeth out. He came to the sanctuary in 2003.

"These animals were abused and mistreated in circuses and zoos, and taken by traffickers who made money out of them," Ynterian says.

"They need a place where they will be treated decently, without visits by the public, that is not a zoo. This is the only such place in Latin America."

Animal trade

Ynterian, 77 has spoken widely in the media about how he took part in his native Cuba in a foiled attack against its late Communist leader Fidel Castro.

Now this Cuban microbiologist fights for the animals.

He joined up with the Great Ape Project, an international association which targets mistreatment in circuses and zoos.

"I've had some serious problems," he says. "People even tried to kill me a few years ago, because there's a lot of money involved in the market in animals."



Merivan Miranda, chimpanzee caretaker of the Great Apes Project (GAP), interacts with a chimpanzee at a sanctuary for apes in Sorocaba, some 100km west of Sao Paulo, Brazil

The Brazilian Traveling Circus Union sued Ynterian, accusing him of being part of an animal-trafficking racket.

The Sao Paulo state prosecution service told AFP it investigated Ynterian and closed the case against him in 2012 without charges.

Simian matchmaking

Staff at the refuge had initially tried to pair Cecilia off with a chimp named Billy, but he turned out to be too impulsive for her.

They hope she will have better luck with Marcelino.

He shares an enclosure with his family, but is not getting on with his father. It is time he found himself a nice girl-chimp and moved out.

Cecilia, meanwhile, "is discovering a different world," Ynterian says.

"She can walk freely over the earth and the grass. She is free in this territory and she can see that there are other chimpanzee families nearby."

He is certain that with time Cecilia will overcome her depression.

"That is what she is seeking to do, so that she can partner with someone and stop living alone," Ynterian says.

"And she will manage to do it."

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Citation: Love beckons for recovering chimp in Brazil refuge (2017, August 21) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-08-beckons-recovering-chimp-brazil-refuge.html>

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