

Chimpanzees are not pets, no matter what social media tells you

September 8 2023, by Jake Brooker



John (left) and Aimi, two chimpanzees rescued in 2018 who are about to welcome three new arrivals to Chimfunshi. Credit: Jake Brooker

Trading wild [chimpanzees](#), including their meat and body parts, is [illegal](#). And yet, social media influencers and companies still reap profits from

sharing "cute" images and videos of chimpanzees and other primates poached from the wild. All the while, sanctuaries worldwide continue to receive orphaned victims of this illicit trade.

As a comparative psychologist who studies the social and emotional behavior of great apes, I have worked with chimpanzee populations both in the wild and in sanctuaries. Currently, I'm working at [Chimfunshi Wildlife Orphanage Trust](#), a sanctuary located in Zambia. Over the past 40 years, Chimfunshi has provided sanctuary to over 100 chimpanzees rescued from the pet and bushmeat trades.

In May 2023, Chimfunshi welcomed three new rescues. Following their rehabilitation, Abbie, Francis and Vanessa will be integrated into a small community of eight other [chimps](#) who were rescued from similar conditions in 2018.

Chimpanzees are not native to Zambia. So, why do these animals still end up in these circumstances, and how can we help to keep them in their wild homes where they belong?

Chimp trafficking

Chimpanzees live across sub-Saharan Africa, in habitats ranging from Savannah-woodland mosaics to tropical rainforests. These habitats that chimps depend on are threatened by the expansion of agricultural activities, alongside the encroachment of the logging, mining and oil industries.

The fragmentation of chimpanzee habitats makes it easier for poachers to hunt them. Chimpanzees are now listed as endangered by the [International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red List](#).

Chimfunshi is home to chimpanzees stolen from the wild and sold for

sums as high as US\$10,000 (£7,900). Prior to their rescue, some of Chimfunshi's chimps were forced to surf for tourists (nearly drowning in the process) and smoke cigarettes. One was even taught to masturbate on circus stages in front of families.

In these conditions, they are in an environment alien to their species. The chimpanzees' natural inclinations are inhibited by chains or harsh training to keep them on their best behavior for [social media](#) or tourists. Typically, "pet" chimps are unable to even interact with their own kind, preventing these incredibly [social animals](#) from knowing how to be themselves.

María Laura Cordonet Castagneto, a University of Girona researcher I have worked with at Chimfunshi, told me that one nine-year-old does not even know how to play or groom, as she was not raised among other chimps. Part of this chimp's rehabilitation is to help her learn such crucial social behaviors from watching and engaging with her new peers.

Most of Chimfunshi's rescues are physically or emotionally scarred from beatings by their previous captors to keep them disciplined. Many will have watched their mothers and peers try to protect them from capture, and being slaughtered in the process.



Isaac, a young chimpanzee in one of the large forested enclosures at Chimfunshi.
Credit: Jake Brooker

Like most primates that are imprisoned in human homes or used by the entertainment industry, chimpanzees quickly outgrow their attraction as "pets" as they age. Their canines grow, they become uncontrollably strong and their behavior more erratic. For every chimp that is saved, many more are abandoned or [killed](#) when they can no longer be controlled.

Not so cute

For a chimp to wear human clothing, play the piano, ride a skateboard or

hang out with tourists paying US\$700 (£560) for a 10-minute session, so much suffering must occur. This is the cruel reality that "cute" TikTok videos and Instagram reels neglect.

Such content is pushed virally to our newsfeeds, regardless of whether the animal is a family dog or a creature illegally poached from the wild. Research has found that depicting wild animals in human contexts can [increase the desire](#) of a viewer to buy their own exotic pet.

But social media companies ignore this problem because this type of content drives considerable online engagement. The Instagram account for [Limbani](#), a chimpanzee who lives in Miami, has nearly 800,000 followers and a [1.5% engagement rate](#) (a measure of how much of your audience actively engages with the content). To put this in context, Kim Kardashian's Instagram account has an engagement rate of around 0.65%.

What can be done?

We can all individually make choices towards the future we want to support. Only sharing responsible online content of wild animals in their natural habitats is one option. But you can take a more active role in wildlife conservation by [avoiding unethical wildlife tourism activities](#).

However, the long-term survival of endangered species can only be guaranteed through a systemic shift in how we perceive and treat the natural world. First and foremost, we must start by making it socially undesirable to own wild animals as pets.

Steps have been taken in recent years to reduce and restrict the trade of exotic animals. More than 50 countries [have banned \(or have announced impending bans on\)](#) the use of wild animals in circuses. And the UK government has [set out proposals](#) to finally outlaw primate pet ownership

in 2024.

Even Hollywood—which has a long history of using trained monkey or ape "actors"—is shifting to the use of computer-generated imagery to depict primates on screen. Social media must catch up, and recognize that holding exotic animals in human contexts represents a grizzly and exploitative industry—and thus reflects animal abuse.

Chimpanzees are our closest living relatives. They are thoughtful, emotional and have complex social needs. They belong in their wild homes where they can be themselves. Primates are not pets.

(The names of Chimfunshi's new rescues have been changed to protect the identities of the [chimpanzees](#) and those who rescued them.)

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