

Why They're Human Rights

By Russell Paul La Valle
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In Spain, a funny thing is happening on the way to the circus -- all of the monkeys are disappearing.

At least, that is what a group of legislators on an environmental committee is hoping will happen, now that parliament is considering a resolution to grant certain human rights to "our nonhuman brothers" -- great apes, gorillas, bonobos, chimpanzees and orangutans. The measure has broad support and, barring the unexpected, is likely to become law within a year. After enactment, harmful experimentation on apes, as well as their use for circuses, television commercials and films, will be prohibited. It will be legal for the 350 apes currently in Spanish zoos to stay there, but their conditions will have to be drastically improved.

With one stroke, Spain will also become the first country to acknowledge unequivocally the legal rights of nonhumans.

The resolution urges parliament to adopt the recommendations of the [Great Ape Project](#), a consortium of philosophers, ethicists, primatologists and psychologists formed in 1993 to ensure the protection of apes from "abuse, torture, and death."

"This is a historic moment in the struggle for animal rights," Pedro Pozas, the Spanish director of the Great Ape Project, told the [Times of London](#). "It will doubtless be remembered as a key moment in the defense of our evolutionary comrades."

The real force behind the initiative is [Peter Singer](#), a professor of bioethics at [Princeton University](#) and co-founder of the Great Ape Project. Singer is widely viewed as the father of the international animal rights movement. His rationale is simple: "There is no sound moral reason why possession of basic rights should be limited to members of a particular species."

Singer is no stranger to controversy. His appointment at Princeton in 1999 caused widespread protests because of his publicly stated contention that parents should have the right to euthanize children -- within 28 days of birth -- who have severe handicaps. "Killing a defective infant is not morally equivalent to killing a person," he has written. "Sometimes it is not wrong at all."

Apparently, though, killing an animal is.

Should animals have rights? The quick and only logical answer is no. A "right" is a moral principle that governs one's freedom of action in society. This concept is uniquely, and exclusively, human -- man is the only being capable of grasping such an abstraction, understanding his actions within a principled framework and adjusting his behavior so as not to violate the rights of others. The source of rights is man himself, his nature and his capacity for rational thought. To give rights to creatures that are irrational, amoral and incapable of living in a rights-based environment makes a mockery of the very concept of rights and, ultimately, threatens man.

Unlike most mammals or other types of creatures, humans are not born with instinctual, inherited knowledge of how to survive. Rather, man's survival is achieved through reason, which allows him to integrate the facts of his surroundings and apply this knowledge to use and shape the natural world for his preservation and advancement. This includes the use of animals, whether for food, shelter or other

necessities.

As the Nobel laureate Joseph Murray has observed, "Animal experimentation has been essential to the development of all cardiac surgery, transplantation surgery, joint replacement, and all vaccinations." Indeed, animal research and clinical study is paramount in the discovery of the causes, cures and treatments of countless diseases, including AIDS and cancer.

Cruelty to animals is of course repugnant and morally indefensible. Yet we should not lose sight of who we are or of our place in the world. Yes, humans have a responsibility as stewards of our domain, but not at our own expense or with the mentality that a cat is a rat is a chimp is a person.

I'm all for the humane treatment of animals. I support better conditions in zoos. But let's let apes be apes and not try to teach them how to recite the Bill of Rights.

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