

Lecture: ethical and legal aspects in animal experimentation

The beginning of the end for chimpanzee experiments?

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The advanced sensory, psychological and social abilities of chimpanzees confer upon them a profound ability to suffer when born into unnatural captive environments, or captured from the wild – as many older research chimpanzees once were – and when subsequently subjected to confinement, social disruption, and involuntary participation in potentially harmful biomedical research. Justifications for such research depend primarily on the important contributions advocates claim it has made toward medical advancements. However, a recent large-scale systematic review indicates that invasive chimpanzee experiments rarely provide benefits in excess of their profound animal welfare, bioethical and financial costs. The approval of large numbers of these experiments – particularly within the US – therefore indicates a failure of the ethics committee system. By 2008, legislative or policy bans or restrictions on invasive great ape experimentation existed in seven European countries, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. In continuing to conduct such experiments on chimpanzees and other great apes, the US was almost completely isolated internationally. In 2007, however, the US National Institutes of Health National Center for Research Resources implemented a permanent funding moratorium on chimpanzee breeding, which is expected to result in a major decline in laboratory chimpanzee numbers over the next 30 years, as most are retired or die. Additionally, in 2008, The Great Ape Protection Act was introduced to Congress. The bill proposed to end invasive research and testing on an estimated 1,200 chimpanzees confined within US laboratories, and, for approximately 600 federally-owned, to ensure their permanent retirement to sanctuaries. These events have created an unprecedented opportunity for US legislators, researchers, and others, to consider a global ban on invasive chimpanzee research. Such a ban would not only uphold the best interests of chimpanzees, and other research fields presently deprived of funding, but would also increase the compliance of US animal researchers with internationally-accepted animal welfare and bioethical standards. It could even result in the first global moratorium on invasive research, for any non-human species, unless conducted in the best interests of the individual or species.

Keywords: great ape protection act, directive 86/609, animal experiment, animal research, chimpanzee, Pan troglodytes, Pan paniscus, great ape