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USING EMPATHY TO UNDERSTAND THE EFFECTS OF OUR ACTIONS

August 6, 2014 · by Jonathan Silver · in community centred conservation, Endangered Chimpanzees

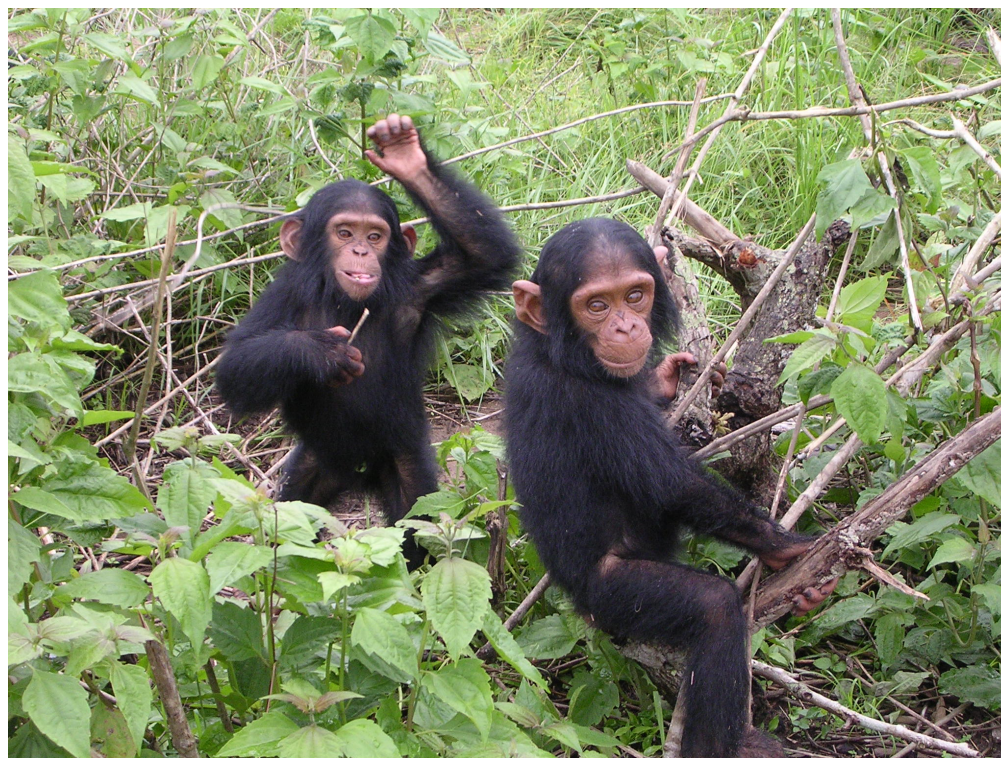
Some of the world's greatest problems result because we often don't directly experience the effects of our actions. Without experiencing these effects, we tend to underestimate the impact our actions have on other people, animals, and the environment. Sometimes we even fail to realize that our actions have any such impact at all.

If the negative consequences of an action seem less negative than they are, or seem not to exist, then naturally the act that led to those consequences won't seem as harmful as it really is, and so we won't have a reason to stop acting in that way.

We'll make headway in solving many problems if we close the gap between our actions and our experience of their effects. This is especially the case when it comes to actions that affect other humans or animals.

When we see another living being suffering, we're able to feel for ourselves what their suffering is like — we're empathetic. Empathizing with another being's suffering can be a powerful experience that drives us to alleviate their pain. JGI applies this fact of human nature at wildlife sanctuaries to save chimpanzees. Let me explain.

The Institute runs several chimp sanctuaries like the [Tchimpounga Sanctuary](#); places that care for injured, orphaned, or displaced chimps. Since it takes an enormous amount of resources to run these sanctuaries, the Institute has been criticized for "wasting" money that could have been better spent on protecting wild chimpanzees and their vanishing habitat"1.



Chimpanzees at Tchimpounga enable visitors to come face to face with chimps. Photo by Delphine Bruyere (Own work) [CC-BY-SA-3.0-2.5-2.0-1.0] via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

But what these critics don't know is that sanctuaries do protect wild chimpanzees and their vanishing habitat, though this happens in an indirect way. One of the greatest benefits of keeping a chimp sanctuary ([though there are many](#)) is it enables visitors to come face to face with chimps. Seeing the chimps, visitors naturally feel for these creatures who they understand have been harmed by practices they engage in like [the bushmeat trade](#) or [the sun-grown coffee trade](#). Visitors empathize with the chimpanzees' suffering and come to understand the kind of effects that follow from their

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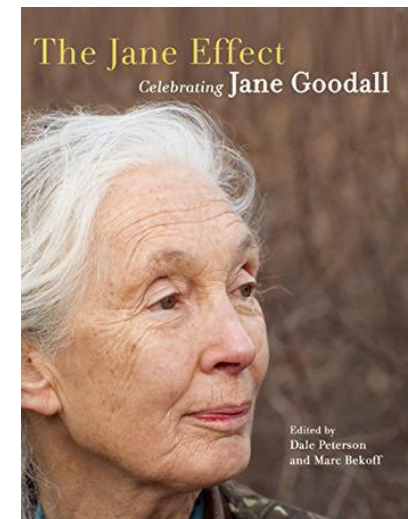
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actions. In other words, the sanctuary is a place where visitors can use empathy to reforge the connection between their actions and the effects that follow from these actions. This is why so many visitors leave saying they "will never eat chimpanzee meat again... [or] go to a restaurant or house where it is served" 1.

Support chimp sanctuaries like [Tchimpounga](#). Support any project that lessens the gap between our actions and their effects. Let's get back in touch the reality of our actions.

Though sanctuaries are important for protecting chimpanzees, our primary goal is to prevent chimps from ending up there in the first place. You can help towards achieving this goal by donating to the Institute's [current campaign](#) to end the bushmeat trade. Donate before August 18th and your donation will be matched!

*See [this article](#) to learn about the collective harm problem, which is a different barrier to world solving issues than the barrier I've talked about here.

1 Goodall, Jane, Gary McAvoy, and Gail E. Hudson. Harvest for Hope: A Guide to Mindful Eating. New York: Warner Wellness, 2006. Print.

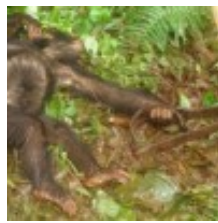
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