

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF**

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**AND**

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**SUBMITTED TO THE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE  
WATER, OCEANS AND WILDLIFE SUBCOMMITTEE  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Thank you to Chairman Huffman and the Water, Oceans and Wildlife Subcommittee for holding a hearing on the Captive Primate Safety Act (H.R. 1776), introduced last year by Congressman Earl Blumenauer and Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick. This bipartisan bill amends the Lacey Act to ban the import, export, and interstate commerce in nonhuman primates for the exotic pet trade. This bill only focuses on privately-owned primates, and would not impact zoos, circuses, universities, labs, or sanctuaries. We strongly support H.R. 1776, and urge Congress to pass this bill without delay.

Providing this testimony today is Dr. Stephanie Poindexter and Dr. Liz Tyson, both of whom have decades of combined experience on primates and the primate pet trade.

Dr. Poindexter, PhD, has studied captive and wild primates for the past 12 years. She completed an BA in Anthropology with a focus in primate studies from Washington University in St. Louis. In 2014, she completed a MSc in Primate Conservation at Oxford Brookes University, where her research focused on primate welfare and trade in Thailand. Dr. Poindexter continued her research on wild primate behavior and conservation, receiving her doctorate in 2018. She has published her research in national and international journals and is regularly invited to speak about her research and what steps we can take to aid primate conservation. She has seen first-hand the conditions in which international animal markets keep captured primates, the physical and psychological trauma endured by former pet primates, and the danger they can pose to primate pet owners. Currently, Dr. Poindexter is an Assistant Professor at the University at Buffalo, where she teaches courses about primate behavior and diversity. She works with a number of regional rescue and research centers throughout Southeast Asia, taking an anthropological perspective on primate conservation.

Dr. Tyson, PhD, has worked in the field of animal protection and conservation since 2004, when she worked as a caregiver at an accredited primate sanctuary in her native United Kingdom. Since then, she has contributed to primate conservation efforts in both the Colombian and Peruvian Amazon, acted as a consultant for the largest wild animal sanctuary in Bolivia, acted as interim manager for the Born Free Foundation wild animal sanctuary, Ensessa Kotteh, in Ethiopia, and is currently Director of the largest primate sanctuary in the United States, run by Born Free USA and based in south Texas. Dr. Tyson was awarded her PhD in Animal Welfare Law from the University of Essex in 2018. Her doctoral research

considered the efficacy of legislation in protecting the welfare of wild animals in captivity. Her thesis is due for publication as part of the Palgrave MacMillan Animal Ethics book series in September 2020. She is a Fellow of the prestigious Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics. Her cumulative experience of hands-on care for victims of the primate pet trade and expertise surrounding the regulation of trade in, and keeping of, wild animals in captivity makes her particularly well-placed to provide expert testimony on this bill.

### **Primate Welfare in the Pet Trade**

All primates have long childhoods and—when in the wild—remain with their mothers or in their family groups for years after birth, and sometimes for life. Contrary to their nature, the primate pet trade typically separates babies from their mothers at just a few months, or sometimes even just a few weeks, after birth. This can cause serious and irreversible mental and emotional trauma for both mother and baby, as well as physical developmental issues for the youngster.

Although it may be obvious, it is nevertheless important to note that all non-human primates are wild animals, regardless of whether they were born in their natural habitat or in captivity. Domestication is a process which occurs over millennia and changes animals genetically from their wild forebears. Primates born in captivity share the same genetic make-up as their free-living cousins and thus have hard-wired needs—social, spatial, dietary—which simply cannot be met when held captive, often in isolation, as a pet.

Primates are social animals, with most species living in multi-generational, multi-family troops of tens or even hundreds of members. Individuals navigate complex social hierarchies, developing friendships, rivalries, and deep bonds with their conspecifics. They traverse diverse and challenging terrain in their native habitats, often covering huge home ranges which change from season to season. Their specific dietary needs are met in their natural environment in a way that captivity cannot provide, and they contribute to the maintenance of global diversity in their roles in their local ecosystems. None of these fundamental needs or functions can be met when a primate is kept in a private home as a pet, often alone and in a cage. As a result, those animals who fall victim to the pet trade suffer immensely.

### **Pet Primates Are a Risk to Public Safety**

Primates are not just wild animals; they are *dangerous* wild animals. Many people in the United States will be aware of the tragic story of Charla Nash, who was attacked by her neighbor's pet chimpanzee in 2009. In a horrific incident, Nash lost both of her hands and most of her face, and later lost her eyes due to a disease transmitted from the chimp. The chimp, Travis, had previously been exploited for entertainment, and was used in several television shows and commercials. He had a history of aggressive behavior toward humans before coming to live in a private home. After he attacked Nash, he tried to attack the police who arrived at the scene as well, who shot him dead. Nash's story demonstrates the clear public safety risk posed by the keeping of primates as pets. While Nash's ordeal was particularly devastating, all primates can inflict serious injury on people. Since 1990, approximately 300 people have reported being injured by primates kept by private individuals, although many more incidents likely go unreported.

When primates reach adolescence, they will naturally seek their place in their social hierarchy. This will usually entail demonstrating aggression towards the “lower ranking” members of their troop in order to improve their own ranking. If their “troop” happens to be a human family, this will often mean physical attacks on children or other young family members. Multiple ex-pet monkeys have arrived at the Born Free USA Primate Sanctuary as a direct result of attacks on their former owners or their owner’s family members. Due to their strong canine teeth, dexterity, and muscle-mass comparative to size, even a small monkey can cause significant injury to a human.

I, Dr. Tyson, had a personal experience of meeting a primate pet owner in the United Kingdom who kept two capuchin monkeys as pets. One day, without warning, one of his pet monkeys jumped on him and bit one of his fingers clean off. Capuchins are one of the most commonly-kept pet monkeys and are considered one of the smaller species. A macaque monkey that Born Free USA rescued last year was brought to us after a serious attack hospitalized the grandchild of his former owner. I received a call just a few weeks ago from a pet owner who needed to urgently rehome his pet macaque because the monkey had recently begun attacking the man’s wife. These are not isolated incidents; they are a highly likely and predictable risk in the keeping of any primate in private hands.

Physical injury is not the only risk posed by the keeping of primates as pets. COVID-19 has brought the issue of zoonotic diseases to the forefront of public awareness, and the risk of disease transmission between primates and humans is very real. Nonhuman primates can easily transmit a wide range of viral, bacterial, parasitic, and fungal diseases to humans, including yellow fever, monkey pox, Marburg virus disease, viral hepatitis, measles, and simian immunodeficiency virus. For example, 80-90% of adult macaque monkeys are carriers of the Herpes B virus. If contracted by humans, Herpes B is fatal in up to 80% of cases.

Only an end to the pet trade will resolve the serious public safety and animal welfare concerns outlined above. While there are sanctuaries, like Born Free USA’s, which care for a small percentage of the victims of the primate trade whose owners chose to do the right thing and relinquished them, there are far too few spaces for the number of animals requiring lifetime care. Over the last few months alone, our sanctuary has been asked if it can provide a home to at least fifteen monkeys. We are currently at capacity and are unable to help in these cases. The likelihood is, if no other sanctuary can provide a home, these innocent animals will be killed. The cost to care for a monkey is generally \$1500 per year. This is a burden usually taken on in its entirety by the receiving sanctuary when an ex-pet is rehomed. Primates can live into their 20s or 30s, depending on the species, so this trade places a huge and totally unsustainable burden on sanctuaries, which are largely operated as not-for-profit organizations relying on donations from members of the general public to survive.

### **Global Implications of the Pet Trade**

The glorification of primates as desired pets—through movies, television, social media, and more—has fueled the primate pet trade. The United States is a significant contributor to this glorification, which has allowed the primate pet trade to flourish despite efforts to limit it.

The U.S. primate pet trade affects more than just the domestic breeders, buyers, and primates; it has a global reach, one which is taking a toll on the world’s biodiversity. The primate pet trade at the

international level is gruesome. In the markets I, Dr. Poindexter, have visited throughout Southeast Asia, primates are kept in small cages stacked to a precarious, unstable height. These markets are hot, noisy, and filled with people who poke and prod traumatized animals. You can easily discern which primates are new to the market as they still cry for help and attention, while others crouch silently in the corner of their cages. It is hard to see these animals sitting in filthy cages with spoiling food and no control over their once-free lives, knowing that they are destined to be dressed up and sold to an ill-equipped buyer.

Limiting the U.S. pet primate trade would set a valuable example we could then urge the rest of the world to follow. We have already made great strides by restricting international importation, but it is clear more action is needed. From a conservation perspective, it is unethical to enable the primate pet trade while wild populations are at risk for extinction. Primates born in the U.S. for the pet trade are done so for personal profit; this trade is counterproductive to conservation efforts looking to restore these dwindling populations within their country of origin. While a primate born in captivity is no less dangerous than one born in the wild, once they have been exposed to an inappropriate diet and have not been taught the many skills needed to survive in the wild, they cannot contribute to restoration efforts. In most cases, upon maturation, they become too much for the private owner to handle; the best-case scenario for them at that point is they become yet another displaced primate consuming limited sanctuary space and resources.

Lastly, the breeding of and trade in pet primates may contribute to the illegal international wildlife trade. Demand for live primates or their parts in the U.S. may increase the capture and sale of those species abroad, many of which are threatened or endangered in the wild. There is no way to know how many U.S.-born primates are disposed of by private owners, or when their parts are illegally sold into black market trade.

We have an opportunity with the Captive Primate Safety Act to make clear our stance on biodiversity, conservation, and animal welfare. As a global leader, the United States needs to set a strong example and restrict the pet primate trade to show that we take these matters seriously.

### **Federal Legislative Solution Needed**

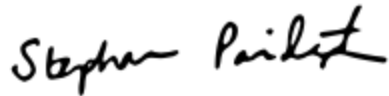
Breeders throughout the country provide a continuous supply of baby primates to meet an insatiable demand. The internet is rife with advertisements for primates for sale, and these dealers ship them to buyers around the country. Sometimes for less than the cost of a purebred dog, a person can buy virtually any species of monkey or ape, but buyers rarely understand what owning a captive primate pet means, for them or for the animal. Due to a lack of federal regulations, the total number of pet primates is unknown, but most estimates suggest there are tens of thousands.

Without a doubt, the poorly regulated primate pet trade in the United States is bad for the animals, their human owners, families, communities, law enforcement officials, and global conservation efforts. The bipartisan Captive Primate Safety Act (H.R. 1776) addresses these issues by amending the Lacey Act Amendments of 1981 to prohibit all foreign and interstate commerce involving non-human primates for the exotic pet trade, including sale, transportation, or acquisition. Enacting this bill will largely curb the rampant internet primate pet trade - a significant step in the right direction.

This commonsense bill is endorsed by a variety of non-profit organizations, sanctuaries, scientists, law enforcement officers, and zoos, including the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, the Conservation Society of California - Oakland Zoo, the Los Angeles Zoo, and the Houston Zoo.

In closing, we would again like to thank the Chairman and this Subcommittee for holding this hearing. We're so appreciative of this Subcommittee's goal to improve the safety and welfare of both humans and primates by focusing on the Captive Primate Safety Act. We are happy to answer any questions or provide more information or clarification. We look forward to working with you on getting this important legislation across the finish line.

Sincerely,



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