

Rep. Earl Blumenauer
Statement for the Record
Legislative Hearing for the Captive Primate Safety Act
Thursday July 29, 2021

Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Bentz, thank you for the opportunity to testify before this committee today.

The Captive Primate Safety Act would amend the Lacey Act Amendments of 1981 to prohibit the interstate commerce and private ownership of nonhuman primates so that these animals can be longer kept as pets.

The practice of keeping nonhuman primates as pets poses serious risks to their welfare, as well as public health and safety.

Most people cannot provide the special care, housing, and social structure these animals require, putting the animals' welfare at risk.

This behavior also puts humans at risk, either from the transmission of zoonotic diseases or serious injury.

When primates reach adolescence, they often demonstrate aggression towards those they perceive as "lower ranking" members of their troop. When kept as pets, this means that they can inflict physical harm on children, friends, and neighbors.

Just last month, in Eastern Oregon, a woman was attacked by her 200-pound "pet" chimpanzee. The chimpanzee had to be shot, and the woman and her mother sustained injuries to their torsos, arms, and legs.

There are no winners in this situation – two people are injured, first responders were put at risk, and a wild animal was killed for expressing normal behaviors after a lifetime of captivity.

Unfortunately, there are more of these examples of highly publicized primate attacks.

In 2009, another woman in Stamford, Connecticut was brutally attacked by a neighbor's pet chimpanzee despite the fact that it is illegal to own primates as pets in Connecticut and that the chimp had previously displayed aggressive behavior.

This woman, Charla Nash, had her face and hands ripped off by the chimpanzee and was left horribly disfigured. Charla even lost her sight due to a disease that was transmitted from this chimpanzee.

I'm happy to share that Charla was one of the first people to receive a full-face transplant and has since recovered, though she continues to be affected by the incident.

These incidents illustrate that primates are wild animals, not pets.

If this all seems familiar, that's because this bill passed the House of Representatives with overwhelming support under suspension of the rules in the 110th and the 111th Congresses.

In fact, we voted on this legislation just a week after Charla Nash was attacked in 2009.

Since this incident, Charla has been a public advocate for this legislation. But Congress has yet to act and, unfortunately, Charla is not the only victim.

Since 1990, approximately 300 people have reported being injured by primates kept by private individuals. Many more incidents likely go unreported.

Some of our colleagues may want to argue that this legislation is entirely unnecessary, and that many states have laws on the books to restrict this practice.

Yet these state laws vary wildly— from a complete ban on pet primates, to bans only on specific species, to no restrictions at all—creating a patchwork of laws.

The Captive Primate Safety Act will help strengthen existing state laws and create a federal framework of protection, licensing, and enforcement.

It's time for Congress to act. We must outlaw the ownership of primates as pets, as well as the interstate commerce of these primates, to protect these animals and our communities.