

Introduction

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<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-podcasts-themes.htm>

This support pack contains the following materials:

- the article that you can listen to in the podcast
- an optional language activity based on the article
- links to other activities on the LearnEnglish website on this theme (human rights).

Read the article

Human Rights for Great Apes?

Sunday afternoon at the zoo.

"Eh, guys! Have a look at this lot!" shouts a youth with cropped hair, braces and big black boots. He's swinging a large bottle of beer in one hand. "The chimps! Check them out!" says one of his friends.

There are six of them who swagger over and lean out over the railings above the chimpanzee pit. They roar with laughter, passing the bottle from one to another.

"Have a look at this guy. He wants a drink."

One of the larger chimps has come over to squat immediately below them and is holding out its hand as if begging.

"Throw him the bottle!"

"Yeah! Give him a drink!"

One of the youths drops the bottle down towards the chimp, who deftly catches it before it can shatter on the concrete floor of the pit. The youths shake all over with laughter.

"Have one on us, fatface!"

The chimpanzee looks directly into the eyes of this last youth as it calmly pours the rest of the beer into the ditch in front of it. The youths don't quite know how to react. Without taking its gaze off the youths, the chimp then places the bottle neatly in the ditch, shakes its head in a worried sort of way, and makes a noise that sounds like "tut, tut, tut". The youths are shocked into silence. They turn and leave without a word, and it is only when they have gone some distance away that they fall back into their normal bad behaviour.

I described that scene some years ago, because I had been struck by the fact that the young men at the chimpanzee pit had been behaving so badly - like "animals" - and the chimp who took the bottle seemed, frankly, to behave in a far more civil and intelligent manner than the youths.

Chimpanzees, and the other great apes - gorillas, orangutans and bonobos (pygmy chimps) - are always one of the favourite attractions in any zoo. There seems little doubt that the main reason for this is because they are so similar to us, and the more "human" their behaviour, the more the visitors to the zoo enjoy themselves.

It is this similarity with humans that has persuaded a group called the Great Ape Project (GAP) to campaign for these animals to be afforded "human rights". In their Declaration on Great Apes, GAP says that the great apes are "(genetically) the closest relatives of our species. They also have mental capacities and an emotional life sufficient to justify inclusion within the community of equals."

The declaration calls for three rights to be granted to great apes:

The Right to Life

"The lives of members of the community of equals are to be protected. Members of the community of equals may not be killed except in very strictly defined circumstances, for example, self-defence."

The Protection of Individual Liberty

"Members of the community of equals are not to be arbitrarily deprived of their liberty; if they should be imprisoned without due legal process, they have the right to immediate release."

The Prohibition of Torture

"The deliberate infliction of severe pain on a member of the community of equals, either wantonly or for an alleged benefit to others, is regarded as torture, and is wrong."

The campaign has resulted in legislation in the New Zealand parliament which could mean that great apes would become the first animals in the world with basic rights that would be protected by the law: the right to life, the right not to suffer cruel or degrading treatment, and the right not to take part in most scientific experiments.

Not everybody is happy with this idea, however. Scientists who use apes and other animals for medical and other scientific research fear that this is just the first stage in a process that will lead to a ban on using all animals for research.

The GAP declaration claims to "provide ethical argument, based on scientific evidence about the capacities of chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans" for attributing "human" rights to great apes. But if we compare the capacities of humans and great apes, then why not the capacities of great apes and monkeys, monkeys and lemurs, and so on until mice or even insects are granted "human rights". This is not as foolish as it might sound - there are many instances of groups of people being excluded from fundamental human rights. How long ago, for example, did women not have the right to vote?

The GAP declaration also states that members of the community of equals have the right to immediate release if they should be imprisoned without due legal process. It is a worrying

scenario, to say the least, to imagine that all great apes in all zoos could have the right to immediate release!

Yet another argument by those who do not support GAP, is that the human-like qualities of the great apes have been exaggerated for political reasons, and that this has led people to exaggerate the similarities between humans and other great apes, and to ignore the differences.

In a fascinating article entitled "What It Really Means To Be 99% Chimpanzee", Jonathan Marks from the Department of Anthropology at the University of California deconstructs the fact that humans and apes are over 98% genetically identical.

As part of his arguments he points out that, although a human and a daffodil share common ancestry and their DNA matches more than 25% of the time, it is plainly ridiculous to claim that we are one-quarter daffodils.

He goes on to demonstrate that, if looked at from one angle, it is true that we are phylogenetically* apes. However, if looked at from another angle, we are also phylogenetically fish! As the author writes: "Doesn't sound quite so profound now, does it?"

** phylogenetic = relating to the evolutionary development of any plant or animal species*

After reading

Exercise 1

Below are 8 questions about the article. For each one choose the best answer, depending on the information in the text.

1. Why did the author describe the scene in the zoo?
 - a. Because the youths were behaving badly?
 - b. Because the chimp behaved civilly and intelligently?
 - c. Because the humans were behaving like animals and the animals like humans?
2. The author says that visitors to zoos always like great apes because:
 - a. They are one of the favourite attractions in any zoo?
 - b. They are so similar to humans?
 - c. They go to the zoo to enjoy themselves?
3. The Declaration on Great Apes says that these animals should be afforded "human rights" because :
 - a. They have sufficient characteristics to include them as our equals?
 - b. Mentally and emotionally, they are our equals?
 - c. They are closely related to our species?

4. According to the declaration, which of the following three statements is NOT true?
- There may be reasons why members of the community of equals may be killed.
 - Any member of the community of equals who is put in prison should be immediately released.
 - It is always wrong to inflict pain on purpose on a member of the community of equals.
5. Legislation in the New Zealand parliament could mean that:
- Great apes could be represented in court to protect their rights?
 - Great apes have all the same rights as humans?
 - Great apes would be the first animals to be protected by law?
6. The author is worried because:
- He thinks that great apes will soon have the right to vote?
 - He doesn't like mice and insects?
 - He doesn't know what the limits of the declaration are?
7. The author:
- Thinks we should let all the great apes out of the zoo?
 - Is worried about what would happen if all the great apes were let free?
 - Believes that all great apes should be locked up?
8. What is the point that Jonathon Marks is trying to make in his article?
- Humans are less than one-quarter daffodil?
 - Humans are as similar to fish as they are to great apes?
 - Being 98% genetically identical is not what it seems on the surface?
 - Apes and fish are phylogenetically similar?

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More activities on this topic

You'll find links to all the following activities connected to the theme of human rights at:
<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-central-themes-human-rights.htm>

- **Word games: Human Rights.** Match words and expressions related to human rights to their definitions.
- **Story: Where Home Is.** This poignant story is about refugees in a place where they don't belong. They spend time listening to sad, sad songs and wondering if they will ever go home.
- **Trivia:** Everything you (n)ever wanted to know about human rights.
- There is also a human-rights-related cartoon and some carefully selected external links.

Answers to activity 1: 1. c; 2. b; 3. a; 4. b; 5. a; 6. c; 7. b; 8. c.