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## Communicating with Homo sapiens

**After 50 years of ground-breaking research on chimpanzee behaviour, Jane Goodall understands the answers still remain with humans. Robert Sibley looks at the accomplishments of this world-renowned primatologist.**

By Robert Sibley, The Ottawa Citizen April 11, 2010

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**Jane Goodell spends some 300 days a year travelling the world on behalf of the Jane Goodell Institute, which promotes projects to protect the environment by alleviating poverty in African countries. She speaks in Ottawa on Monday as part of the Writers Festival.**

**Photograph by: Kevin van Paassen, Canwest News Service**

Jane Goodall well remembers when she discovered another world. Nearly 50 years ago, she was just beginning the study of African chimpanzees that would make her famous and redefine the way we view animals.

She'd been trying for months to win the trust of a group of chimpanzees in the forests of Tanzania. One in particular -- David Greybeard, she called him -- intrigued her. One day, following him through dense forest, she found him sitting as though waiting for her. She sat nearby. Spotting the red fruit of an oil nut palm on the ground, she picked it up and held it out to David. He turned his head away. She gestured again. Suddenly, she recalls, David turned, "gazed directly into my eyes, took and dropped the nut, then very gently pressed my hand with his fingers."

Goodall recognized the gesture as the way chimpanzees show they understood each other.

For Goodall, it was "very, very meaningful and moving not only in terms of my relationship with David Greybeard, but in understanding and empathizing with chimpanzees.

"What he did in that moment was communicate in a way that both of us understood equally without the use of words, a communication that pre-dated words."

That "communication" has reverberated across the last five decades of Goodall's life, inspiring her campaign to save the chimpanzees -- and all animals -- from extinction. "David Greybeard has long since gone to the Happy Hunting Grounds, but I have honoured his trust through all the years after this death."

So she has.

Goodall speaks Monday in Ottawa at a sold-out pre-festival event for the Ottawa Writers Festival as part of its global perspectives series. Goodall gained world-wide fame with a 1971 book, *In the Shadow of Man*, that detailed her years of studying chimpanzees in Tanzania's Gombe National Park, and showed that chimpanzees use twigs and stones as tools, engage in rituals, and have feelings of love and grief -- just like humans.

It was a world-changing argument, and a hard one for scientists to accept. Until Goodall, most thought only humans used tools.

Evolutionary scientist Stephen Jay Gould said her work "represents one of the western world's greatest scientific achievements." Anthropologist Louis Leakey said that because of Goodall's observations "we must ... redefine man, or accept chimpanzees as human."

Half-a-century later, Goodall is still trying to convince the world to change its way of thinking (and, hence, its way of acting).

"I've heard this saying, 'we haven't inherited this planet from our parents; we've borrowed it from our children.' But when you borrow, you're supposed to pay back. We haven't been paying back. We've been stealing from our children."

Today, approaching her 76th birthday, Goodall could, if she wished, rest on her laurels -- more than a dozen honorary doctorates, numerous scientific awards, the French Legion of Honour, Dame of the British Empire. Instead, she spends some 300 days a year travelling the world on behalf of the Jane Goodall Institute, which promotes projects to that aim to protect the environment by alleviating the poverty in African countries, and offers environmental training and education through its youth-oriented global education program, Roots & Shoots, which has more than 10,000 groups in more than 100 countries.

Persuading young people is crucial, says Goodall. "If you can, on one hand, persuade people to do with less, and, on the other hand, help people develop a dignified life without desperately harming the environment, and you have young people growing up with these models, then you have hope for the future."

Goodall traces her focus on young people to the animals of her childhood. Next to her mother, she credits a dog with being her greatest guide. "One of the most meaningful relationships I've had with any animal was my childhood friend, companion and teacher, my dog Rusty. We had an extraordinary relationship. I knew long before I got to the chimps that animals had personalities, minds and feelings."

Goodall is convinced children who grow up without animals in their lives risk being psychologically compromised in terms of their capacity to empathize with others. "It's been shown -- there's been experiments and lots of people have written about this -- that children who don't have the opportunity to interact with nature, and especially animals, suffer from it."

So, too, does the planet, Goodall suggests. She questions whether children's emotional development is cauterized by the hours they spend in a virtual world that extols self-assertion and aggression.

Goodall remembers a trip she made several years ago in Congo-Brazzaville. She and her companions stopped their car on a road for a rest. She wandered deep into the forest, seeking the solace of the forest like a monk seeking the quiet of the cloister. She stopped when she no longer heard voices. Only there was no solace. It was silent -- no bird cries, animal noises or monkey calls. "Everything had been hunted and eaten. It was a despairing moment. I was so happy to be out there in the forest, expecting to feel what I always feel. But it wasn't there anymore."

Despite such moments, Goodall refuses to give in to despair. How could she? She has a son, Hugo, a zealous convert to the conservation cause, and three grandchildren, at least one of whom, Merlin, shows promise in his empathetic regard for animals. "I would rather end my life trying desperately to improve things for my grandchildren than just to say, 'there's nothing I can do, so I won't do anything.'"

Goodall acknowledges that her efforts to protect endangered species will, if successful, produce a sad paradox: The animals will depend for their survival on the beneficence of humans. But "managing" the animal kingdom effectively means there are no truly wild and free animals.

Goodall also recognizes that "management" brings moral quandaries. What, for example, is to be done with animals -- deer, geese, squirrels, raccoons, coyotes -- whose populations have exploded because humans created environments that allow

them to thrive?

"It's something you struggle with, and there really isn't an ethical answer. The sad thing is, we will have to manage them, otherwise they will destroy themselves." Does management mean culling? "Cull is a euphemism I don't resort to. We have to kill."

This rejection of false sentiment arguably reflects the tough-mindedness that sustains Goodall against those who regard efforts to save animals as naive sentimentality.

What keeps her going? Well, there's the memory of David Greybeard, the hope for her grandchildren, and the fact that behind the seemingly fragile exterior -- a slight, soft-voiced woman with straight silver-grey hair in a signature ponytail, as one journalist described her -- is an iron will.

But there's something else, too. "I have this belief in a great spiritual power, which I don't pretend to understand. But I have sensed it, felt it. I feel this spiritual power most strongly when I am in nature by myself. It helps to give my own life meaning and it gives me strength to carry on. I keep the peace of the forest in my heart."

*Robert Sibley is a senior writer with the Citizen.*

**Book review: [Jane Goodall's hopeful tales of conservation heroes](#)**

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**Jane Goodell spends some 300 days a year travelling the**

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**Photograph by: Kevin van Paassen, Canwest News Service**

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