Basic Rights for Apes: Campaign to Change Germany's Constitution

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Volker Sommer, Professor of Evolutionary Anthropology at UCL, is one of the main activists behind the initiative to enlarge the "community of equals" and grant basic legal rights to our closest living relatives, bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans.

A first concerted effort to have the German constitution changed will be announced on May 8th, 2014, during a press conference in Berlin's Bundespressehaus. The podium will include prominent philosophers and animal rights lawyers. The press conference coincides with a petition to the Deutscher Bundestag.* At least 50,000 signatures are needed to trigger a public hearing of the petition committee of the German parliament.

The organisers are aware that they may not achieve this goal at first attempt, but view this as part of a long-term strategy. Nevertheless, since its launch three years ago, the campaign has gathered much momentum and sparked a lively public debate in Germany. Numerous media, from TV to Radio to broadsheet and tabloid newspapers as well as magazines have carried major stories on the subject. Prominent politicians of virtually all parties have felt the need to provide statements on the subject, both pro and con. Germany's leading political magazine, "Der Spiegel", will carry an interview with Volker Sommer that coincides with the press conference.

www.giordano-bruno-stiftung.de/meldung/pressekonferenz-grundrechte-fuer-menschenaffen-lebenslaenglich-hinter-gittern
www.greatapeproject.de/
www.giordano-bruno-stiftung.de/sites/default/files/download/greatapes2.pdf

Fundamental Rights for Great Apes - A Brief History

Philosophers Peter Singer and Paola Cavalieri initiated “The Great Ape Project” in 1993. It demands to extend some of the privileges currently reserved for human beings to orangutans, gorillas, bonobos and chimpanzees: the right to life, the right to individual liberty, and the prohibition of torture. These demands are basic and they remain measured – because nobody requests a right to education for bonobos, voting rights for gorillas, data-protection rules for chimpanzees or a minimum age for sexual consent amongst orangutans. Supported by eminent primatologists, the Great Ape Project simply wants to expand the “community of equals” in certain aspects. For example, it should be unlawful to inflict pain on great apes for the alleged benefit of others – as is done in biomedical
experiments. Moreover, their freedom should not be arbitrarily deprived—although it is recognised that, for their own good, apes born in captivity might need to be kept in a zoo or in a sanctuary where they were brought to as orphans after hunters had killed their mothers. Defenders of the project would also like to see that great apes are recognized as “persons”, given that their complex mental landscape includes consciousness, emotions and sophisticated cognitive abilities such as forward planning and empathy.

Demanding basic equality for great apes is the logical extension of a historical trend. Ethical sentiments amongst humans were first restricted to one’s own relatives, then extended to clans, later to members of larger societies, and eventually to all people—with the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Why should we stop short here and ignore the interests of beings that experience suffering and joy in ways very similar to us—merely because they are not human beings? Humans have strived to defeat nationalism, racism and sexism. We believe the historic moment has come to overcome a further barrier—that of “speciesism”, which justifies discrimination based on species membership. (Of course, some would like to extend equality to many other animals as well—whereas others assert that we should presently only go as far as to include all great apes. In any case, working towards the goals of the Great Ape Project does not mean we stop considering the fair treatment of other animals.)

Interests of humans unable to speak up for themselves—such as infants or those afflicted by conditions such as Alzheimer’s—are represented by guardians. Guardians can therefore also safeguard the legal rights of great apes.

As Albert Schweitzer put it, we are “life that wants to live, in the midst of life that wants to live.” This premise should be reflected in a more responsible approach to the lives of non-human animals—and especially in our relationship with those organisms with whom we share a close evolutionary history.

*Wortlaut der Petition an den Deutschen Bundestag: "Der Deutsche Bundestag möge beschließen, dass Große Menschenaffen (Schimpansen, Bonobos, Gorillas und Orang-Utans) als Rechtspersonen anerkannt und in ihren Grundrechten geschützt werden. Hierzu soll Artikel 20a GG durch einen zweiten Absatz mit folgendem Wortlaut ergänzt werden: "Das Recht der Großen Menschenaffen auf persönliche Freiheit, auf Leben und körperliche Unversehrtheit wird geschützt. Artikel 2 Abs. 2 Satz 3 GG i. V. m. Art. 19 Abs. 1, 2, 4 Satz 1 GG gilt entsprechend."

UCL Anthropology, 14 Taviton Street, London, WC1H 0BW Tel: +44 (0)20 7679 8633