

# Great Ape TRUST OF IOWA

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## Paintings by Great Ape Trust resident apes debut in exhibit at Des Moines coffeehouse

*Proceeds from five-week 'Apes Helping Apes' exhibit at  
Zanzibar's Coffee Adventures will assist conservation efforts in the wild*

Des Moines, Iowa – October 18, 2007 – Art created by orangutans and bonobos at Great Ape Trust of Iowa, a world-class scientific research center in southeast Des Moines, will be featured in an exhibit Oct. 22-Nov. 25 at Zanzibar's Coffee Adventures, 2723 Ingersoll Ave., Des Moines. The paintings in the "Apes Helping Apes" exhibit will be available for sale, with 100 percent of proceeds going to ape [conservation](#) in the wild.

The five-week "Apes Helping Apes" exhibit is part of an ongoing commitment by Great Ape Trust to assist grassroots organizations supporting conservation initiatives for bonobos, chimpanzees and gorillas in Africa and orangutans in Asia. The situation is urgent. All great ape species are endangered in the wild. According to [estimates](#) compiled by Great Ape Trust, wild populations have declined 80 percent to 90 percent since 1900. Some subspecies, such as mountain gorillas, number only in the hundreds.

The apes creating the paintings for "Apes Helping Apes" did so voluntarily and as part of ongoing enrichment activities at Great Ape Trust, where scientific research seeks to understand the origins and future of culture, language, tool use and intelligence. The

# NEWS RELEASE

work at The Trust builds on a growing body of research that has found the four types of great ape – bonobos, orangutans, chimpanzees and gorillas – are thinking, self-aware and intelligent beings.

Enrichment activities are important at Great Ape Trust so individual apes can be given a wide variety of choices each day and have as much control over their lives as is reasonably possible in a captive setting, said [Dr. Rob Shumaker](#), The Trust's director of orangutan research. Enrichment is not considered a separate activity at Great Ape Trust, he said, but rather a philosophy of daily management and research.

"All apes are cognitively complex, and all deserve an enriching environment provided by a variety of tasks that are interesting and enjoyable," Shumaker said. "Some are structured, such as experimental tasks, and some are unstructured, such as the opportunity to paint. Painting allows them to express their creativity, intelligence and natural curiosity."

## ***Allie creates 'in a way that is possible for her'***

Peter Clay, a senior orangutan caretaker, brought the idea for an exhibit of ape-created art home from a recent ZACC (Zoos and Aquariums Committing to Conservation) conference. Ape caretakers at Great Ape Trust are encouraged to develop conservation initiatives, and Clay thought the Houston Zoo's successful "Pongos Helping Pongos" initiative, in which engaging, colorful artwork created by their orangutans was used to raise thousands of dollars for *in-situ* conservation, could be duplicated in Des Moines.

In addition to using art to raise awareness of the plight of all four types of great ape in the wild, Clay thought the project would be a good fit for the dexterous orangutans and pique their natural curiosity. "Orangutans are particularly interested in manipulation and seeing what's possible, how things are put together and how things are taken apart," Clay said.

Among Great Ape Trust's three resident orangutans, [Allie](#) is the principal artist. The Trust's adult male orangutan, [Azy](#), is disinterested in creating art, and [Knobi](#), an adult female, displays varying degrees of interest. A number of the paintings were

# NEWS RELEASE

collaborative efforts between Allie and Knobi, with each of them applying the color of their choice.

“Azy isn’t engaged at all,” Clay said. “He made it very clear by pushing the brush away. However, that may change with time. We just don’t know.”

An adolescent female, Allie is known to scientists, caretakers and others at Great Ape Trust for her strength of character. Allie suffered a neurological event of unknown origin that left her partially paralyzed while at the Denver Zoo, and she moved to Great Ape Trust in 2005 because scientists and caretakers at both facilities thought she would prosper in the more vertical facilities that allow her to explore new and creative ways to locomote.

Most of the orangutan paintings were done with paintbrushes extended with PVC pipes through openings in the mesh walls, but Allie also created sponge paintings, using her lips to navigate the sponge around the canvas.

“Allie provides daily proof to the point that there is a cognitive complexity and desire to be creative that is inherent in her,” Shumaker said, “and she does it in a way that is possible for her.”

## ***Sense of fairness permeates bonobo painting exercise***

In the bonobo home, paintings have been created by world-famous bonobos [Kanzi](#) and his sister, [Panbanisha](#), as well as her son [Nathan](#), 7. As young apes, Kanzi and Panbanisha acquired language – debunking earlier-held beliefs that language is unique to human beings – and now understand thousands of words that they communicate using symbol-based lexigrams. Great Ape Trust of Iowa scientists are the only researchers in the world doing language research with bonobos.

Though not empirical scientific evidence, events surrounding the bonobos’ creative process gave Director of Bonobo Research [William M. Fields](#) more insight into what he considers their sense of fairness, an aspect of the philosophy of language discussed in *Kanzi’s Primal Language: The Cultural Initiation of Apes into Language*. The book, which Fields co-wrote with his Great Ape Trust colleague [Dr. Sue Savage-Rumbaugh](#) and Dr. Pär Segerdahl of Uppsala University in Sweden, explains how Kanzi

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spontaneously acquired language as a young ape in a culture he shared with humans, imparting new knowledge into how culture and language interlace in early childhood.

Fields had hoped [Nyota](#), a 9-year-old adolescent male, would do some painting, an activity he's shown interest in the past. However, Fields said he missed some important cues and Nyota's mother, Panbanisha, eventually intervened by pointing to the symbol on the lexigram for "paint" and "later."

The situation required a social resolution among the bonobos. Without Fields being aware of it, they had already decided who would do the painting. "It was Kanzi's turn to get to do something special, and it took me a little while to get to that point," Fields said. "For me, fairness permeates this entire event."

The bonobos showed distinct preferences in their creations, which Fields called "deliberate and intentional." For example, Kanzi used a broad brush to paint, then requested that one of the caretakers retrieve a brush with smaller bristles for the finishing strokes. The bonobos chose colors – Kanzi prefers muted tones, while Panbanisha leans toward brilliant primary colors – and determined the orientation of the canvas. Nathan inspected both sides of his canvas, stretched across a wooden frame, and decided to paint the back side.

## ***Why ape art at Zanzibar's?***

Great Ape Trust is working with Peggy Leonardo, Des Moines Art Center studio programs director, in asking 6- to 8-year-old students in the Animals in Art class to name the yet-untitled works. The youngsters will review the exhibit in its opening days, then make suggestions for titles for the works.

Zanzibar's Coffee Adventures owner Julie McGuire has been featuring the work of central Iowa artists on the walls of her business since it opened in 1993. She was ahead of the curve in Des Moines and hers was one of the first businesses in the city to offer "found" gallery space to artists. "We benefit because we get something new on the walls," McGuire said, "and the artists benefit because they get a chance to show their work," McGuire said.

# NEWS RELEASE

The “Apes Helping Apes” exhibit represents the first time Zanzibar’s has exhibited art by non-human artists, but saying yes to Peter Clay of Great Ape Trust was an easy decision, McGuire said.

“Great Ape Trust is an absolute gem that has attracted some brilliant people,” she said. “You can’t visit it like you can a zoo, but we can provide some exposure by engaging the public in the apes’ art and challenging some of their perceptions.”

McGuire said she’s eager to see how Zanzibar’s patrons respond to primate-created art. Exhibits there are not juried and McGuire does not make critical judgments about quality or impose her standards on the artists.

“Everybody has a different opinion about what is good, and some people may question ‘This is good?’ when they see the ape art,” she said. “But that’s part of the conversation, part of the dialogue.”

McGuire hopes that viewing art by apes will cause people to nurture their own creative expression. “If we are willing to look at what an ape might do artistically,” she said, “it might open ourselves to accepting our own creativity.”

The goal of “Apes Helping Apes” to raise money for ape conservation in the wild is aligned with some of McGuire’s goals as a purveyor of coffee. She recently traveled to Nicaragua with the Women in Coffee Leadership Program, an organization blending economic and social justice concerns and designed to develop talents and strengthen the technical skills of Central American women working in the coffee industry.

Similarly, many of Great Ape Trust’s conservation partners take an “outside in” approach that seeks to simultaneously improve the quality of life for people who depend on natural resources while conserving the same resources great apes are dependent upon for survival.

Deforestation is a critical issue in Nicaragua, just as it is in many of the range countries in Africa and Asia where endangered great apes are found in the wild. Deforestation on all three continents is occurring in part to meet agricultural demands, but also to meet home heating and cooking wood-fuel needs.

“Sustainability of the forest is the biggest concern in our world environment – period,” McGuire said.

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## ***GREAT APE TRUST BACKGROUND***

Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a scientific research facility in southeast Des Moines dedicated to understanding the origins and future of culture, language, tools and intelligence. When completed, Great Ape Trust will be the largest great ape facility in North America and one of the first worldwide to include all four types of great ape – bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans – for noninvasive interdisciplinary studies of their cognitive and communicative capabilities.

Great Ape Trust is dedicated to providing sanctuary and an honorable life for great apes, studying the intelligence of great apes, advancing conservation of great apes and providing unique educational experiences about great apes. Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a 501(c) 3 not-for-profit organization and is certified by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). To learn more about Great Ape Trust of Iowa, go to [www.GreatApeTrust.org](http://www.GreatApeTrust.org).

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**Insights Through Collaborations with Apes**