

Nonhuman Rights Project Calling for Changes at Project Chimps

From [Nonhuman Rights Project](#)

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In recent months, whistleblowers have brought to light well-documented information that shows Project Chimps and the Humane Society of the United States (Project Chimps' primary funder) are not fulfilling their commitment to provide true sanctuary to Project Chimps' chimpanzee residents, including the NhRP's clients Hercules and Leo. The NhRP is calling on Project Chimps and HSUS to take whatever steps and devote whatever resources are necessary to immediately provide Hercules and Leo with daily access to an outdoor habitat. Please find the NhRP's statement below.

For years, our clients, chimpanzees [Hercules and Leo](#), were imprisoned and exploited in a basement lab at Stony Brook University for use in locomotion research while “on loan” from the New Iberia Research Center (NIRC) in Louisiana. Since the day we brought a habeas corpus lawsuit on their behalf demanding recognition of their right to bodily liberty, we have advocated relentlessly for our clients' release to a sanctuary where they could live freely and enjoy their autonomy for the first time in their lives.

We argued for sanctuary for Hercules and Leo throughout our litigation, which saw them become the [first](#) nonhuman animals in the world to have a habeas corpus hearing to determine the lawfulness of their imprisonment. We campaigned for it after Stony Brook University, bowing to public pressure prompted by our litigation, [announced](#) they would no longer use Hercules and Leo in research and NIRC secretly transported them [back](#) to their facility.

We then immediately commenced negotiations with NIRC to have Hercules and Leo moved to Save the Chimps in Florida, which was a fully operational, world-renowned sanctuary in which we had secured places for them before we ever filed suit on their behalf. There, Hercules and Leo would have had near-unfettered outdoor access to a three- to five-acre island with numerous other chimpanzees. Near the end of these negotiations Project Chimps, then a not-yet-operational sanctuary, agreed with NIRC to take in hundreds of chimpanzees imprisoned at NIRC and [refused](#) our requests to allow Hercules and Leo to go immediately to Save the Chimps. Thus Hercules and Leo were forced to spend years in captivity at NIRC that they could have spent in freedom at Save the Chimps.

In 2018, after Hercules and Leo arrived at Project Chimps, we [wrote](#) to Kitty Block, president of The Humane Society of the United States, on behalf of our clients and presented our serious and well-founded concerns about Project Chimps' capacity to provide appropriate care to Hercules and Leo, especially regarding daily access to an outdoor habitat, which is essential to chimpanzees' ability to exercise their autonomy and their physical and psychological health. Ms. Block [dismissed](#) our concerns, writing that HSUS is “confident that Project Chimps will devote the resources necessary to provide the best lifetime care to all of the chimpanzees at its sanctuary, including Hercules and Leo.”

Note: Project Chimps is an affiliate organization of HSUS, which is a primary funder of Project Chimps. HSUS staff and major donors have served on the board of Project Chimps, and HSUS maintains control over the sanctuary.

In the two and a half years that followed, Project Chimps assured us that a plan was in place and on track for Hercules and Leo to have daily access to the outdoor habitat. We therefore believed that Hercules and Leo were finally going to experience the freedom, peace, and dignity they had long been denied and for which we had so long fought on their behalf.

In recent months, however, whistleblowers have brought to light well-documented information that shows Project Chimps and HSUS are not in fact fulfilling their commitment to provide true sanctuary to Project Chimps' 78 chimpanzee residents, including Hercules and Leo.

Specifically we have [learned](#), and Project Chimps does not dispute, that Hercules and Leo are confined to an indoor housing structure with cement floors and an enclosed porch all but ten hours a week. Project Chimps' Executive Director told us they expect the earliest they will receive daily outdoor access is in two years. In our view, this timeline is an unacceptable failure to live up to Project Chimps' founding promise: lifelong exemplary care for chimpanzees retired from research.

For this reason, we are calling on Project Chimps and HSUS to immediately make changes in their planning and operations to ensure they are respecting chimpanzees' freedom and autonomy.

As we remain committed to advocating for the interests of our clients, Hercules and Leo, we demand that Project Chimps and HSUS take whatever steps and devote whatever resources are necessary to immediately provide them with daily access to an outdoor habitat, either at Project Chimps or any other suitable place.

We also strongly urge Project Chimps and HSUS to immediately take concrete action to enable the other chimpanzees at Project Chimps to have daily access to the outdoors, not two or more years from now, but today.

Please see below for a timeline and documentation of our concerns about and interactions with Project Chimps and HSUS, beginning with Hercules and Leo's arrival at Project Chimps:

March 21, 2018: Hercules and Leo are transferred to Project Chimps.

April 16, 2018: We privately [reached out](#) to HSUS President Kitty Block to express our serious concerns about Project Chimps' ability to properly care for Hercules and Leo. One of our primary concerns was that "Project Chimps does not and will not for the foreseeable future have the capability to provide its chimpanzees with unfettered outdoor access." We requested the transfer of Hercules, Leo, and their social group to a sanctuary that had the ability to immediately provide them with daily outdoor access among other needs. Ms. Block [dismissed](#) our concerns.

September 30, 2018: NhRP staff visited Project Chimps to see the sanctuary and learn more about Hercules and Leo's living situation. During a public tour, we were told the goal was for the current chimpanzee residents to be introduced to one another and eventually be a fully integrated troop that can have unfettered access to all of the villas and outdoor habitat. As there were fewer than 50 chimpanzee residents at that time, this plan, while ambitious, seemed possible. We left the sanctuary feeling optimistic about Hercules and Leo's future at Project Chimps.

September 2018-March 2020: During this time, we received regular updates on Hercules and Leo's lives, including their achievements (such as being more comfortable in the outdoor habitat and bonding with new chimpanzees) and the setbacks they faced (such as Leo having a difficult time when integrating with a new social group). Again, we remained cautiously optimistic about their future at Project Chimps given how Project Chimps presented their living situation to us as well as our understanding of the difficulties involved in caring for chimpanzees traumatized by use in research.

March 2020: After Project Chimps informed us Hercules and Leo were doing well, we celebrated the second anniversary of their release on our blog.

April – July 2020: We were contacted by a Project Chimps whistleblower, a former employee, who made serious allegations about the welfare of the chimpanzees at the sanctuary and shared specific concerns about our client Leo. She presented us with detailed allegations and supporting evidence of the concerns voiced by her and twenty former Project Chimps employees and volunteers. One allegation that was particularly alarming was that Hercules and Leo received access to the outdoor habitat only once every three days. After speaking by phone with the whistleblower, we immediately contacted Project Chimps' Executive Director Ali Crumpacker to discuss the allegations. She confirmed that Hercules and Leo only receive access to the outdoor habitat once every three days. Over the next few months, we spoke to one of Hercules and Leo's caregivers, Ms. Crumpacker, and other individuals who used to work at the sanctuary or otherwise had firsthand knowledge about Project Chimps in order to learn more about their care and daily lives. Again, we were told that Hercules and Leo lacked daily access to the outdoor habitat.

July 8, 2020: National Geographic published an [article](#) that described the allegations about Project Chimps' operations and its chimpanzee residents' welfare. The article included a statement from Project Chimps leadership as well as statements from the whistleblowers who alleged that there were serious deficiencies at the sanctuary. Again, in this article, Project Chimps reiterated that its chimpanzee residents spend most of their time confined to their housing structures and receive access to the outdoor habitat only once every three days.

July 24, 2020: We emailed a [letter](#) to Bruce Wagman, Project Chimps Board of Directors President, requesting that Hercules and Leo begin receiving daily access to the outdoor habitat. In response to this email, a call was arranged with Ms. Crumpacker on July 31st during which she confirmed that Hercules and Leo's access to the outdoor habitat had not changed since we visited the sanctuary in 2018 and that the earliest they will receive daily outdoor access is in two years. Ms. Crumpacker also implied that the sanctuary would need to take in even more chimpanzees before Hercules and Leo would have daily outdoor access because their group needed to be balanced out with some older female chimpanzees. As it stands, Project Chimps' plan to have 78 chimpanzees—many with special needs and deep trauma—cohabiting on only six acres, further crowding this small space, seems impossible and ill advised. It is worth noting that while Hercules and Leo have now spent over two years with only minimal access to the outdoor habitat, there are chimpanzees at the sanctuary who have been forced to live almost four years without daily access to the outdoor habitat. This is unacceptable.

September 4, 2020: We emailed a [letter](#) to Kitty Block regarding our concerns about Hercules and Leo and requested a call with her to discuss HSUS' plans to ensure Hercules and Leo promptly receive daily outdoor access. We received no response.