

Primates: Special Needs of Great Apes



Great apes need extra space and opportunities to express natural behaviors.

WHAT BEHAVIORS DO GREAT APES NEED TO EXPRESS?

Important behaviors for great apes can be a little different for each species. Here are a few common behaviors to consider:



DID YOU KNOW?

Choice and control over their environments is essential for the well-being of all great apes. You can address this by offering them many options in their enclosures. Examples include: access to vertical levels; allowing free choice to go inside or outside, and providing space and complexity to interact with different companions at different times.

Social Behavior

Social housing is especially important for the psychological well-being of chimpanzees, bonobos, and gorillas. In captivity, they need enough space and the right kind of materials to engage in natural social behaviors, such as “bluff displays” or other actions that reinforce their rank in the group. They also need areas designed for privacy and rest (solitary spaces).



Nest Building

All great apes build nests so they have a comfortable place to sleep. Many like to build **a new nest each day**. Offering them nest-building materials (e.g., straw, wood, wool, blankets, towels) and elevated resting areas (e.g., hammocks, shelves) are good ways to support nest building.

Movement and Activity

Great apes are active throughout the day in the wild. An inactive lifestyle in captivity harms both their mental and physical well-being. Enclosure designs for great apes should offer the animals opportunities and motivation to get up and move around, explore, brachiate (use their arms to swing), and climb.



Foraging

Great apes spend much of their day foraging. Offering foods that make them work to access edible parts (like whole fruits and nuts that need to be peeled or broken open) or use tools (like artificial termite mounds) gives them mental stimulation and a way to express important natural behaviors. Browse is another great choice for edible enrichment that requires manipulation and processing.



ANIMAL CARE AID

This Animal Care Aid is part of a series developed to help with promoting psychological well-being in primates. Topics covered in the series include social grouping, supporting species-typical activities, and special considerations.

Questions? Email us at CenterforAnimalWelfare@usda.gov

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