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Obituary

Remembering Dr. Jane Goodall (1934–2025)

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Jane Goodall. Credit: Jo-Anne McArthur/We Animals

In the early morning of Wednesday 1 October 2025 the world lost one of its greatest scientists, animal advocates, environmentalists and humanitarians ever. At the age of 91, Dr Jane Goodall died peacefully in her sleep while on speaking tour through Canada and the USA. Hours later she would have addressed over a thousand students.

I had the privilege of working with Jane Goodall for some thirty years. I contacted her as a student in moral philosophy, when I did research around the ethics of keeping animals in zoos. We worked closely together to improve the living conditions of chimpanzees in various substandard zoos. She was a scientific adviser of my Ph.D research towards the moral status of non-human great apes. Later, I became co-chair of the Global Ethics Committee of the Jane Goodall Institute (together with Marc Bekoff). And a few years ago, she asked Melody Horrill and I to set up a Cetacean Committee, with the aim of facilitating ending the keeping of dolphins in captive tanks and bringing them to seaside sanctuaries (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRsT2cv7AkY>).

Where did it all begin? Jane Goodall started her research of the chimpanzees in Gombe, Tanzania, on 14 July 1960 (now every year celebrated as World Chimpanzee Day). Paleoanthropologist Louis Leakey (1903–1972) wanted to understand the behavior of our hominin ancestors by studying the behavior of chimpanzees in the wild. Ever since her childhood, Jane Goodall, who was brought up in a poor family, wanted to study animals in Africa. She saved money to travel to Africa by working as a waitress. She became Leakey's personal assistant at the Natural History Museum in Nairobi, before he asked her to start a small field study. This was the first successful study of great apes in the wild, only preceded by George Schaller, who followed mountain gorillas for a year (in 1959–1960). Later, Leakey would also set up long-term field studies of mountain gorillas by Dian Fossey and orangutans by Biruté Galdikas. To gain academic credibility, Goodall studied ethology at the University of Cambridge, where she was awarded a PhD in 1965.

Early on, Goodall discovered that wild chimpanzees hunt, eat meat and make rudimentary tools. Chimpanzees would strip leaves from a branch and take it towards a termite mound to fish for termites. Benjamin Beck attended Goodall's first scientific presentation in April 1962. She stunned the scientific audience with her descriptions of tool behavior, which she identified as “a social tradition, which represents . . . a primitive culture” (Goodall, as quoted in Beck, 2024). Goodall was criticized by some established primatologists, but all her observations were verified. Her research refuted Kenneth Oakley's definition of *Man the Toolmaker*. This would elicit from Louis Leakey his legendary comment that “Now we must redefine ‘tool’, redefine ‘man’, or accept chimpanzees as humans.”

Furthermore, Goodall described chimpanzees as having unique personalities. She wrote about their intelligence and emotional behavior — strong mother-infant bonds, adoption of unrelated others, play, deception, dominance, consorts, primitive warfare, intra-community conflicts and reconciliation. She gave the chimpanzees she studied names — David Greybeard, Flo, Fifi, Gremlin — and described their unique personalities. Thus, argues Matt Ridley, she broke through an academic taboo on the study towards the mental lives of animals. This taboo had been imposed by behaviorism during the early 1900s. She blazed a unique, emancipatory trail for other ethologists and scientists. When she received the Templeton Prize in 2021, the interviewer asked on what of her achievements she was proudest. Goodall answered: “The fact that animals are sentient beings. (...) thanks to the chimpanzees (...) science gradually came around to understanding that we are part of and not separate from the rest of the animal kingdom” (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=971A505HaBE>).

During the 1960s and later Jane Goodall’s research gained wide visibility through National Geographic. Her observations were captured in photographs and on film by Hugo van Lawick, with whom she was married from 1964 until 1972. Their son Hugo Eric Louis, better known as ‘Grub’, was born in 1967. Goodall was later married to Derek Bryceson, from 1975 until his death in 1980. Bryceson was a Tanzanian politician and director of the country’s National Parks.

Jane Goodall wrote numerous books and articles, but her magnum opus was *The Chimpanzees of Gombe: Patterns of Behavior* (Goodall, 1986). More popular chimpanzee books include *In the Shadow of Man* (Goodall, 1971) and *Through a Window: My Thirty Years with the Chimpanzees of Gombe* (Goodall, 1990). She has also written popular children’s books (like *With Love* (Goodall, 2014), illustrated by Alan Marks), animal advocacy books (such as *Visions of Caliban: on Chimpanzees and People*; Goodall & Peterson, 1993) and spiritual books (like *Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey*; Goodall & Berman, 1999 and *The Book of Hope: A Survival Guide for Trying Times*; Goodall & Abrams, 2021). Many documentaries were made about her life, including recent examples such as *Jane Goodall: The Hope* (by National Geographic, 2020) and *Famous Last Words: Dr. Jane Goodall* (Netflix, 2025). Dale Peterson (2004) wrote a detailed biography on Goodall’s life and career, *Jane Goodall: The Woman Who Redefined Man*.

Jane Goodall founded the Jane Goodall Institute in 1977, initially to support the research at Gombe. However, the turning point for Goodall's advocacy came in 1986. During the symposium 'Understanding Chimpanzees', organized by Goodall and the late Paul Heltne (1941–2023) in Chicago, Goodall realized that she had to leave Gombe and become an activist. She started to travel the world for more than 300 days a year to bring her message of hope. In 1991, Goodall founded her Roots & Shoots youth program, a grassroots initiative where young people take action to help animals, the environment and people. Goodall wanted to inspire young people to understand that hope means taking action, based upon the conviction that every individual matters and can make a difference every single day. In 1992 she founded the Tchimpounga Chimpanzee Rehabilitation Centre in the Republic of Congo, to help chimpanzee orphans confiscated due to the bushmeat crisis. This sanctuary is home to more than 150 chimpanzees and is the largest of its kind in Africa.

This was followed by the development of TACARE in 1994, a community-led conservation model. Goodall realized that she needed to work with local communities surrounding Gombe to address their needs. Chimpanzee protection, habitat conservation and addressing poverty are intertwined in Goodall's view. This model was spread to Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, the Republic of Congo, Senegal and Uganda. In 2002, Goodall was appointed UN Messenger of Peace by Secretary-General Kofi Annan. In 2017, Goodall founded the Jane Goodall Legacy Foundation, to create an endowment to sustain her programs. The Trees for Jane Campaign was launched in 2021 to support the goal of planting one trillion trees. As of today, the Jane Goodall Institute has 27 chapters around the world, Roots & Shoots groups in over a hundred countries and planted millions of trees in Africa and elsewhere.

Jane Goodall has received numerous awards, including the Gandhi/King Award for Non-Violence (2001), the Benjamin Franklin Medal in Life Science (2003), the Prince of Asturias Award for Technical & Scientific Research (2003), Dame of the British Empire (DBE, by HRH Prince Charles, 2004), the French Legion of Honour (by President Jacques Chirac, 2006) and the Presidential Medal of Freedom (by President Joe Biden, 2025).

Over the years, Jane Goodall and I have worked together on many delicate ethical topics. These challenges could keep her literally awake at night. She struggled with the idea of considering rats and mice as 'pests' and killing

these in order to conserve endangered species. For example, painful poisons are used in New Zealand that cause a lot of suffering, not only in target animals, but also in dogs. We made recommendations to the services of then PM Jacinda Ardern (Margodt, 2022). Upon Jane Goodall's suggestion, we wrote an essay together on factory farming and plant-based diets. Goodall was a long-term vegetarian and became vegan in recent years. She considered plant-based diets a 'win-win-win' — for animals, the planet and our health (Goodall & Margodt, 2024). When Paul Watson risked extradition to Japan for his — nonviolent — advocacy against whaling, she followed the situation closely. She asked me to express her concerns to the Danish PM Mette Frederiksen and did all she could to help Paul, who was released in the end. In August 2025, we had our last Zoom call. She expressed her deep concern about European zoos approving a breed-to-kill policy for all kinds of (young and healthy) animals, including dolphins and great apes, thus turning back the clock over a century. For Jane, human and non-human animals were individuals and every individual mattered. This was our guidance in all ethical topics we discussed over three decades — “how can we take the interests of each and every individual involved into account?”

This focus was also very present in her personal relationships. Whenever anyone faced personal challenges, Jane would be there to send words of courage or support. For me, she was closely and repeatedly in touch when my mother passed away or when one of our daughters faced some serious health challenges. But also when all went well, Jane would suddenly send a picture or little movie to me or a little group of friends. And she never used BCC — never mind whether there was a famous scientist, politician or actor, like Leonardo DiCaprio, included. She very much enjoyed receiving wildlife or family pictures, as light moments along a road of hard work and dedication.

The chapters of the Jane Goodall Institute will continue supporting the projects initiated by their founder. Roots & Shoots projects that empower young people. Sanctuaries that offer a safe haven to chimpanzee orphans, survivors of the bushmeat trade. Tree planting initiatives around the world, in the race against climate change. And, of course, making sure that the place where everything started continues to prosper in the future. The Gombe field study is still ongoing 65 years later and is as such the longest running study of any non-human animal. Researchers have embraced a variety of modern technologies to study the chimpanzees and conserve their habitat, including

satellite imagery, GIS mapping, ecoacoustic sensors, onsite DNA analysis, digital data collection and AI analysis of large data sets.

Some people wonder who will replace Jane Goodall. No single individual can replace Jane, she has blazed an unique trail in many ways, whether as a pioneering primatologist, conservationist, animal advocate or humanitarian. She leaves an enormous legacy and has always tried to inspire people to have hope and undertake action. Whether you donate to a project, help dogs in a shelter, visit the elderly in a retirement home, purchase an electric car or bike, shift to a plant based diet or turn off the lights when leaving a room and close the water tap while brushing your teeth — all of these steps matter and were dear to Jane. She walked the talk, lived a very sober life and hoped to inspire people with her message that each and everyone of us can make a difference every single day of our lives.

In Davos, Jane Goodall made in 2024 the distinction between iconic Jane and little, normal Jane (Serhan, 2024). We all can help continuing the legacy of iconic Jane. However, ironically and just like for everyone else, replacing little, normal Jane proves to be impossible. Jane is survived by her sister Judy, son Grub and grandchildren Merlin, Angel and Nick. Their sister, mother and grandmother is irreplaceable — though she will live on forever in their memories, and ours.

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