

Visiting the Mona Foundation

Thursday, July the 3rd, Tisa Kosem (student of the 3rd edition of the Master in Animal Law and Society of the UAB), Martina Pluda (student of the upcoming academic year), Jennifer Guyer (visiting psychologist from the United States), and Danielle Holt (intern from the Animal Law Programme of the Lewis and Clark Law School) had a visit of the Mona Foundation in Riudellots de la Selva.

The Mona Foundation is the first primate rescue center in Spain, founded by Olga Feliu. It's not a chance that "mona" means monkey in Catalan. Built between 2000 and 2001, on 8 hectares of land donated by the mayor of Riudellots, this NGO hosts today 30 chimpanzees and 4 Barbary macaques. The animals that arrive at Mona are animals that have been confiscated by authorities because they were being illegally kept, either as pets or for commercial purposes (mainly for entertainment such as shows, circuses, advertisement, etc.). In these cases the breach of law does not refer to the poor conditions the primates were living in, since these are not regulated, rather to the absence of official papers according to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Unfortunately Spain is – for its geographical location – the ideal scenario for the illegal trafficking of wild and exotic animals between Africa and the rest of Europe and is a country where working with animals has a long tradition.

One of the main goals at Mona, besides offering these incredible creatures an adequate captivity life, is to educate visitors. As our guide Alba repeated various times, chimps and macaques are not pets: they are wild and not domestic animals. People tend to think of monkeys as cute, little, playful animals and upon buying one they think it will remain like this for all its life. The truth is that they cannot be kept and trained by repressing their natural behaviours because when they grow up they are not so

submissive anymore, as their animal instincts start to arise and it is not in their nature to live outside their natural habitat. This can of course be very dangerous. For example an adult chimpanzee can be five times stronger than an adult man, whilst macaques have very powerful jaws with long canine teeth. In the world of entertainment these monkeys “accept” training only until the age of 6-7; after that they start to become difficult to deal with and the only way to keep their behaviour under control is by putting them in cages. So these primates live, in most of the cases, a life of confinement, considering they can grow to be 60 years old. The chimps at Mona have been saved around the age of 20, after more than 10-12 years of imprisonment, in cages where they could barely move and were never allowed to go out.

At Mona they get a second chance to live their captivity in the best possible way. In the 5600m² big enclosures they dispose of vertical and horizontal climbing structures, swings, closed shelters, and enrichment activities to keep them busy and make them interact in the most natural way as possible. These chimpanzees and macaques will never be reintroduced into the wild because the close contact with humans, from a very early age, would not allow them to survive, as they do not know how to provide for themselves. Nevertheless at Mona they have the possibility to live with others of the same species, interact, and develop their natural social behaviour.

Mona is a private foundation, member of the World Society for the Protection of Animals, which is subsidized by public funding. But this is not enough; the estimated cost of a chimpanzee is of 6,000. - € per year. Therefore private donations are also very important to support the animals already living at the Foundation and allow the rescue of more animals. In this particular moment more funds would allow Mona to take in 34 more monkeys waiting to be rescued, build more and new enclosures, add platforms and towers, and contract new people, since at the moment the Foundation can count on only five fix salaries and volunteers changing every 6 months.

“The Mona Foundation is doing amazing work for rescued chimpanzees and macaque monkeys. The small organization cares for chimpanzees and macaques, which would otherwise live out their lives in tiny cages, too small to run, jump, or play. It was a great pleasure to visit the Foundation and learn about these magnificent creatures, which are now living a much better life.”

Danielle Holt

“The visit to the Fundación Mona was very interesting and educational. We had a chance to visit the Foundation’s property in a small group, which made our experience even better. Ms. Alba has made an excellent job presenting us the work and the goals of Foundation. We have seen chimpanzees fully integrated in the foundations environment and also the ones that are still in a transitit mode, before being introduced into the group and starting to enjoy an appropriate and enriched life.

Personally, I can say that this was an important experience because I could see the tremendous work done and the effort put by the personnel of the Mona Foundation to save and rehabilitate chimpanzees and other monkeys from imprisonment and bad living conditions, and to offer them the best possible habitat. I believe that this sanctuary, which took a pioneer role in Spain to change the living conditions of illegally captured and kept primates, should be a good example for other European projects.”

Tisa Kosem

For all of us it has been a pleasure to witness the success of this project and the well being of the animals. We absolutely recommend paying a visit to the Fundación Mona and its beautiful chimps and macaques. If you are interested in the project and want to know more (and maybe also donate) go to: <http://www.fundacionmona.org/en/>.

Martina Pluda