Greens introduce bill to ban import of live primates for research

OVERVIEW

On 22 November 2012 the Australian Greens animal welfare spokesperson Lee Rhiannon introduced a bill in the Senate to ban the importation of live primates for research.

No primates have been imported to Australia for research since 2009, the year a major undercover UK investigation confirmed major concerns about the trade.

There are already three government funded primate breeding facilities supporting medical research in Melbourne and Sydney, “to protect species in the wild by breeding them in captive colonies’.

Between 2000-2009 Australia imported - primarily for the booming biomedical research industry:

- 331 pig-tailed macaques listed on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species as vulnerable to extinction (from Indonesia)
- 250 long-tailed macaques listed on the IUCN Red List (from Indonesia)
- 71 owl monkeys listed on the IUCN Red List (from the US).

The illegal trade in primates is recognised as one of the biggest threats to biodiversity conservation. It is recognised most of these primates are born to wild-caught captive monkeys in Asian facilities set up as lucrative money making facilities. They effectively ‘launder’ wild caught monkeys and sell them as captive breeds. These monkeys are caught in barbaric ways, kept in filthy crowded conditions and transported inhumanely.

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Australia is signatory to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which commits to ensuring international trade in flora and fauna does not threaten a species’ survival.

Further, Australia’s National Health and Medical Research Council’s (NHMRC) policy on non-human primates for scientific purposes states that “whenever possible investigators obtain non-human primates from National Breeding Centres” and “non-human primates imported from overseas must not be taken from wild populations and must be accompanied by documentation to certify their status.”

Labor MPs have already expressed concern. In 2011 Labor MP for Deacon Mike Symon tabled and spoke to a petition from Humane Research Australia calling for a ban and in February 2012 the Speaker of the House of Representatives MP for Chisholm Anna Burke wrote to the Trade Minister about the issue.

The Greens’ bill does not ban the use of primates for research or the importation of primates for other purposes, for example for zoos.

It recognises the current situation in Australia where primates have not been imported for research for over three years and ensures Australia will not contribute to the unethical trade of wild-caught primates to be used in experimentation under any future government.

**Background to the Greens’ bill**

The Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Prohibition of Live Imports of Primates for Research) Bill 2012 amends the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act which regulates the international movement of wildlife.

The use of primates in experiments is globally contentious, with animal, political and scientific campaigns in every continent set on stopping this practice and calling for researchers to be more proactive in using alternate research methods.

The Greens see this bill as a small but achievable first step in addressing the cruel and inhumane primate export trade. It is Australia’s chance to show the international community that Australia does not support or participate in the unethical global trade in primates for experimentation.
What is happening in Indonesia?
Australia’s main supplier of primates for research prior to 2009

After India and then Bangladesh banned primate exports in the late 1970s, Southeast Asia became “a major hub of wildlife trade”.

Around 3,000-4,000 macaques are recorded as exported from Indonesia for research each year. With the massive deforestation of Indonesia, this presents a clear risk to their long term future.

While Indonesia is signatory to the same CITES convention as Australia, there is no policed restriction on wild-caught monkeys.

A major 2009 British Union Against Vivisection undercover investigation, ‘Indonesia: the trade in primates for research” revealed Indonesia’s official ban on the export of wild-caught primates for research is a farce. It found wild monkeys living on Australia’s main source island in Indonesia - Tinjil Island – are coded as ‘captive bred’ because Indonesia deceptively classifies the whole island as a breeding facility.

The investigation underlined the extent of cruelty and suffering inflicted on the monkeys during their capture, confinement and transportation.

Monkeys are trapped, often inhumanely, by villagers attracted by the ready income. Baby monkeys are taken from their trapped parents who are often killed rather than being released back into the wild. Mother monkeys are shot with air rifles forcing them to flee and drop their infants, or chased by dogs to be entangled in nets or ropes which often strangle the trapped monkeys.

The monkeys, including the infants, are then kept in filthy, crowded and barren concrete pens with metal grid floors lacking fresh air or sunlight, many with no access to water or food. In one primate breeding and supply facility infants were kept in small empty pens with smooth walls, no perches and only a wire ceiling, from which the scores of babies would hang frightened in the absence of safe shelter.

Monkeys are then subject to transportation around the world, sometimes spending up to four days in transit, packed into crates too small to stand up in. They suffer noise, inadequate ventilation and extreme temperature fluctuations and can lack food and water as a result of transport delays. One UK primate import company alone had a mortality rate of nearly 19% of its delivered monkeys, all from Indonesia, during 1988-1991.

What primates did Australia import for research?

Australia permitted the import of 301 live primates for research between 2000-2009.

However according to the CITES Trade Database Australia importing 627 live non-human primates in this period. Species included (bracketed numbers as per DSEWPC advice. Unbracketed numbers as per CITES trade database):

- 331 (255) Pig-tailed macaques, Macaca nemestrina: imported from Indonesia and listed as ‘Vulnerable’ to extinction on the IUCN red list.
• 71 (46) Owl monkeys, Aotus nancymaae: imported from the US (25 coded for breeding purposes). Listed on the IUCN red list of Threatened Species, with a concern noted that large numbers are used in research, sometimes illegally, “which should be monitored to understand the effect on populations”.

• 250 Long-tailed macaques, Macaca fasciculari: imported from Indonesia. Listed on the IUCN red list, with the proviso that the population trend is declining, and survey is needed to establish the status of certain island populations. In 2011 a CITES meeting expressed an imperative reassessment of the species by CITES because of the trapping, laundering and largely illegal trade of massive numbers of wild caught M.fasciculari to support the pharmaceutical industry.

What is happening internationally on banning the use of primates for experimentation?

The use of great apes in experiments is now banned by the EU, in the US, UK, Holland, Sweden, Germany and Austria. New Zealand has not only banned such research, but bestowed basic rights to the five great apes in 1999.

Australia still allows experiments on the great apes if approved by the NHMRC. The NHMRC guidelines “Policy on the Care and Use of Non-Human Primates for Scientific Purposes” are currently under review.

Are the Australian Greens against using animals in research?

The Australian Greens do not oppose the use of primates, or animals more broadly, for research.

We support, however, the global scientific 3R principle for the use of animals for research – replacement, refinement and reduction. We back a transition to alternative research methods where possible to minimise unnecessary suffering, especially of highly intelligent animals like primates.

Around the world an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 non-human primates, or monkeys, are used in experiments every year and tens upon tens of thousands of monkeys are traded to meet the research industry demand. In the US alone, the use of non-human primates in experiments rose from 57,518 in 2000 to 71,317 in 2010.

Australia is one of the highest users of animals for research in the world, fourth behind the US, Japan and China.