

Francis Collins, M.D., Ph.D.
Director
National Institutes of Health

Via e-mail: execsec1@od.nih.gov

Dear Dr. Collins,

I hope this letter finds you well. As the leader of the Human Genome Project, you were widely quoted as saying: “It is humbling for me, and awe-inspiring, to realize that we have caught the first glimpse of our own instruction book, previously known only to God.” I, too, have experienced this humility and awe at the vast complexities of nature, the intricacies of biology. As a girl in Alexandria, Virginia, I spent hours at a creek blocks from my house watching whirring insects, flitting fish, and slick-skinned frogs. Since then, I’ve slogged through leech-filled swamps in Borneo to observe orangutans, scaled trees towering over the Amazon River to spot dolphins, and boated down the twisting waterways of Sundarbans in search of tigers. I’ve authored 28 books for adults and children about sharks and hyenas and tree kangaroos—to name a few—and I care deeply about the other animals with whom humans share the Earth. That’s why I’m appealing to you today, as a fellow explorer of the wonders of biology, to consider the macaques trapped in a National Institutes of Health laboratory and end their torment in experimenter Elisabeth Murray’s cruel tests.

On one of my first expeditions outside the U.S., I studied emus in the Australian outback, fastidiously recording each time they ate, played, and slept. During that time, I thought often of Jane Goodall, whom I had admired since childhood. I recalled a photo I had seen in *National Geographic* of her and a wild chimpanzee, their arms outstretched toward one another, fingertips nearly brushing. Like Goodall had done with the chimpanzees, I was determined to enter the world of the animals I studied on their own terms; it was why she had managed to make such profound and astonishing discoveries, while other scientists had given up after only a few months of watching their subjects run away into the trees. Following her example, I wore the same clothing each day so the emus would recognize me and grow used to my presence. Eventually, I was able to approach them within five feet. I began to understand the incredible gift they had given me by allowing me into their lives.

But the macaques in Elisabeth Murray’s laboratory do not choose what they give us. Far from willingly allowing humans into their lives, they have been forced to participate in ours, trapped in small cages where they are unable to engage in the most normal and natural of behaviors or exercise any control over their environment. I was sickened to learn that the torments they endure include neurotoxic injections, repeated restraint, food and fluid restriction, trauma-inducing psychological tests, and other harms. I am shocked that this egregious cruelty is occurring at the nation’s premier biomedical research agency.

Just as Goodall discovered that the key to meaningful data about the primates she studied was meeting them on their own terms, I find it difficult to believe that any significant findings—about macaques *or* humans—could come from housing primates in such an artificial,

impoverished environment. A monkey deprived of normal social, cognitive, and emotional stimulation, as it would seem monkeys are in this laboratory, is no more useful a model of human behavior in the “real” world than a human locked in a closet alone from birth. It’s likely that the stresses inherent in living in a laboratory environment further alter the monkeys’ responses in these experiments, confounding the results.

The intelligence and complexity of each and every one of the animals I’ve studied—among them several species of primates—boggles the mind. Octopuses cover themselves with shells to hide from predators. Mandrills fashion “Q-tips” from twigs to clean their ears. Chimpanzees use crushed leaves to sop up water to drink. I am certain that rhesus macaques, too, are extraordinary creatures who suffer deeply from being confined to a laboratory cage.

Dr. Collins, please consider that allowing Murray’s experiments to continue is not compatible with the reverence for life in all its wondrous complexity that has motivated your work as a scientist. I urge you to end them today.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Sy Montgomery