Louie is not the usual zoo chimpanzee. Though he currently lives at the Maryland Zoo in Baltimore, Louie was born in captivity to animal trainers and spent his time learning tricks and appearing in movies, even learning how to snowboard for a starring role in *Most Extreme Primate*. When his owners decided to leave the animal training business they contacted ChimpCARE, an organization that helps transition privately owned chimpanzees into zoos and sanctuaries across the country. ChimpCARE is affiliated with the American Zoological Association (AZA) and helped place Louie at the Maryland Zoo. Now, ChimpCARE’s director, Dr. Steve Ross, is asking that many more chimpanzees join Louie in “retirement”.

Dr. Ross, through the AZA, has filed a petition with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service to reclassify captive chimpanzees as endangered species under the Endangered Species Act. Seven other organizations have joined the petition as cosigners, including the Jane Goodall Society and the Humane Society. Reclassification would give captive chimpanzees more protections, and make it more difficult for them to be bought as pets, or used in the entertainment industry. The petitioners argue that such protections are necessary for the welfare of individual chimpanzees and for the long term survival of the species.

“People watch a movie with a chimp and laugh without realizing what’s behind that. Every time a person see’s a chimpanzee [in a movie] it’s been taken away from its mother almost immediately [for training],” says Dr. Ross. As evidence for the need for reclassification, he also points to research that shows that the use of chimpanzees in movies and entertainment leads the public to believe chimpanzees are less endangered than they actually are.

A strong sentiment expressed in the petition, and in the statements of many of its supporters, is that owning chimpanzees as pets, or training them to perform in movies, inevitably leads to emotional harm or physical abuse of chimpanzees. A famous British circus-trainer was
indicted for kicking and beating a baby chimpanzee in 1999, and since a 2005 case in which an
undercover primatologist documented a year’s worth of abuses in a Hollywood trainer’s facility,
professional chimpanzee trainer’s are often hesitant to talk about their business or practices.
While animal abuse is illegal, it can be hard to witness and document in private facilities. The
petitioners hope to remove chimpanzees from such facilities entirely to end the possibility of
abuse.

Steve Martin is one of the few professional animal trainers left who works with
chimpanzees. His chimpanzees are most famous for the controversial CareerBuilder
commercials. Mr. Martin, along with several other trainers, declined a request for an interview.
On his website, however, he has posted a video responding to claims of abusive practices and
improper facilities alleged by the animal rights organization PETA. He states such claims are
“just another agenda of these animal rights organizations trying to stop us from having animal’s
altogether, and the chimps are [at] the top of the list.”

Sam Morishima, a snowboard instructor who had never before been near a chimpanzee,
taught Louie how to snowboard for Most Extreme Primate. Mr. Morishima was immediately
impressed by Louie’s natural ability. “[Chimpanzees are] phenomenal athletes, but with the
attention span of a two-year old.” Mr. Morishima says. To work around this, Louie was “trained
like a professional athlete,” with training periods that were “short but frequent, fifteen minutes
and that’s it.” To entice Louie into training or practicing, Mr. Morishima would use fruit
gummies, and if Louie performed particularly well, he was rewarded with a can of soda. Later
though, “Louie loved to snowboard so much that he just kept going, and I would have to chase
him down the mountain.”
Mr. Morishima is conflicted about the possible restrictions a reclassification would bring. He has no intention of training chimpanzees again, but he had positive experiences training Louie. “It’s a complex [issue],” Mr. Morishima says, “Rules are nice, but they’re generalizations. Some chimps will take better to acting than others. [A trainer] shouldn’t force a chimp [to act] but you can look at some of them and say they will be a good actor,” and that while most owners “would abuse them, use them and [then] discard them,” Louie’s owners were deeply concerned with Louie’s health and wellbeing.

While Mr. Morishima is on the fence about the possible new regulations, Dawn Forsythe is decidedly not. Her father trained chimpanzees to perform in shows at the Detroit Zoo before being fired in 1964 for throwing a chimpanzee against a wall. Ms. Forsythe is now a citizen blogger seeking better treatment for chimpanzees.

“Being so close [to the chimpanzees] and seeing the chimps on the ponies…it was mind-blowing for a kid,” says Ms. Forsythe of the shows, but she also recalls the sparse backstage living conditions. “[I remember] how sterile everything was. [It was] more of a hospital setup, each chimp had its own cage…on concrete and white tile. [They] were not allowed to form bonds, because then they wouldn’t form bonds with the trainers.”

In the time since her father was fired, primatologists have discovered that chimpanzees make and use tools, engage in complex emotional relationships, and even organize group hunts. “What angers me the most,” Ms. Forsythe says, “is that in the 40s, and 50s and 60s, we can use the excuse that we didn’t know any better. Now we know better…marketing executives know better. [It’s] fifty years later and they’re doing the same stupid things.”

There are approximately 100 chimpanzees in the possession of private owners and trainers in the United States, and it is unclear what exactly would happen to these chimps if the
reclassification occurs. The owners would not be required to give up their chimpanzees, but nominally, at least, the reclassification would prevent commercial activities related to chimpanzees. This may lead some owners to give up their chimpanzees since they would no longer be able to profit from breeding the chimpanzees or using them in movies. The Fish and Wildlife Service could also choose to reclassify chimpanzees but still allow breeding and commercial activities by special permit.

If the owners do decide to give up their animals some might end up in zoos like Louie, but zoos are usually cautious about taking human-raised chimpanzees because of the long rehabilitation process that is required for the chimpanzees to act naturally with the other members of their species. What is more likely is that the chimpanzees would be given to sanctuaries that specialize in caring for chimpanzees raised by humans.

Accredited sanctuaries, unlike zoos are not open to the public and focus solely on caring for the animals rather than on research or education. Jen Feuerstein is the director of Save the Chimps, the largest chimpanzee sanctuary in the world, and oversees the care of several chimpanzees that were used in show business. “[Entertainers] profited from these chimpanzees but have not donated or provided for them [since they arrived here],” Ms. Feuerstein says, angered that the sanctuary must ask for public donations to bear the cost of feeding, housing and caring for the chimpanzees for the forty to fifty years they live after their entertainment days are finished.

While Ms. Feuerstein supports the petition, she is unsure if it will achieve its goals because Fish and Wildlife could still grant special permits. Nevertheless, she believes the petition is a step in the right direction. “[The goal] in the long term is to reduce the number of chimpanzees that need sanctuary and [ultimately] lead us to close our doors.”