

# Chimpanzees recognized as “legal persons” for first time in history

**A New York court granted Hercules and Leo writ of habeas corpus on Monday**

JOANNA ROTHKOPF, Salon 4/21/15

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For the first time ever, two research chimpanzees were recognized as legal persons by a New York court on Monday. The chimps, Hercules and Leo, are currently housed at Stony Brook University on Long Island, where they are used for biomedical research. They have now been granted habeas corpus by Manhattan Supreme Court Justice Barbara Jaffe and will be relocated to a sanctuary in Ft. Pierce, Florida.

The Nonhuman Rights Project, the organization which filed the suit, has filed a number of similar cases — including one for 26-year-old chimp Tommy who lives in a trailer lot, which is still pending in New York State Supreme Court.

The Verge’s Rich McCormick reports:

Three lower court judges dismissed the cases as they were raised in 2013, but the Nonhuman Rights Project appealed, eventually convincing Jaffe that the animals were sufficiently intelligent to grant them what amounts to basic human rights.

Jaffe has ordered a Stony Brook representative to appear in court on May 6th to reply to the Nonhuman Rights Project’s petition that the animals are being held unlawfully. It could be that the judge organized the hearing to listen to both sides of the case before making a decision, and will ultimately decide that Stony Brook can keep the apes — Richard Cupp, a law professor at California’s Pepperdine University told *Science* it would be “quite surprising” if the judge made “a momentous substantive finding” that chimps were legally people without both parties being able to have their say.

“This is a big step forward to getting what we are ultimately seeking: the right to bodily liberty for chimpanzees and other cognitively complex animals,” said Natalie Prosin, the executive director of the Nonhuman Rights Project. “We got our foot in the door, and no matter what happens, that door can never be completely shut again.”