

Defender of Primates

Summerville, South Carolina

Looking after twenty-three abandoned and injured gibbons at her Summerville primate sanctuary is the easiest part of Shirley McGreal's work. Assisted by two animal caregivers, McGreal tends the gibbons every day, feeding them lettuce and fruit in the giant bamboo-shaded mesh enclosures she has installed on her ten-acre property. In this peaceful rural setting, the animals can recover from abuses inflicted by research laboratories and cruel pet owners. Some rescued animals have lived to be more than thirty years old—"a ripe old age" for gibbons, says McGreal.

But inside her office, the mood is less tranquil. Two staffers are answering multiple phone lines, and urgent documents are coming in by fax from around the world.

Welcome to the headquarters of the International Primate Protection League. As the Primate Protection League's founder and chairwoman, McGreal has spent the last twenty years investigating and preventing illegal trafficking in the world's endangered and trade-threatened primates. Her mission is to make primate sanctuaries, including her own, unnecessary.

McGreal and other Primate Protection League volunteers analyze cargo itineraries and even pose as animal dealers to obtain proof of illegal activity. They have exposed lucrative primate-smuggling rings in Asia and Eastern Europe—cases McGreal says represent only the tip of the iceberg in a multi-million-dollar-a-year business. The Primate Protection League's findings have saved several primate species from decimation. The governments of Thailand and India banned the export of all primates after enduring a vigorous Primate Protection League campaign. The Thai and Indian primates had been destined for shipment to unscrupulous Western zoos, wildlife parks, exotic pet stores, and research laboratories. Many would die before they arrived at their final destination,

packed into crates designed to conceal their unauthorized contents.

Such practices continue today, says McGreal. When skeptical Thai officials recently X-rayed a crate marked BIRDS bound for Yugoslavia, they discovered six baby orangutans inside, barely alive. Captured in a Borneo jungle, the endangered animals were barred from export under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. The Primate Protection League immediately dispatched orangutan specialist Dianne Taylor-Snow to Bangkok to care for the dehydrated and sickly animals, and McGreal set to work investigating the crate's itinerary.

McGreal, who is proficient in five languages, worked contacts around the globe, tracing the shipment from the Bangkok airport to a German animal dealer, then to one of the largest primate suppliers in the world, Miami-based Worldwide Primates. Three months later, she turned her findings over to the division of law enforcement of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Worldwide's owner, Matthew Block, was later indicted for violating the Endangered Species Act. At this writing, the case has not been decided.

In the interim, however, Block tried to cripple the Primate Protection League's investigations by hauling McGreal into Federal court and charging her with "intentionally, maliciously, and unjustifiably" interfering with his business dealings. Using volunteer lawyers, McGreal not only beat back the dealer's harassment suit, but is now seeking court-imposed sanctions against Block and his lawyers.

This wasn't the first time the Primate Protection League provoked the ire of wealthy and litigious wildlife dealers or animal researchers.

The Austrian multinational corporation Immuno A.G. brought a libel suit against McGreal in 1984, after she wrote a letter to the editor of a small-circulation primatology journal. In

her letter, McGreal objected to Immuno's plans to use captured chimpanzees for hepatitis research in Sierra Leone, pointing out that the corporation's scheme was likely to destroy the wild chimpanzee population. Chimpanzees, she noted, like many primates that live high in the trees, are caught by shooting their mothers. "Any hunter will



INTERNATIONAL PRIMATE PROTECTION LEAGUE

Shirley McGreal and friend Igor at home

tell you that the surest way to attack the integrity of the species is to shoot the breeding females," she says.

After seven years, McGreal's right to express her opinion was affirmed by New York's highest court.

The Primate Protection League has grown considerably since McGreal founded it in 1973. It now has branches in the United States, Europe, and Australia, along with dozens of volunteer field representatives around the world. The organization's 30,000-strong membership helps support the League's anti-smuggling campaigns and makes small grants to local "eco-detectives," who videotape illegal wildlife activities. Most are young activists, outraged by smugglers' depletion of native wildlife populations for personal profit. "I've been doing this for twenty years," McGreal says proudly, "and I feel like I've been reincarnated."

—HOLLY METZ

(Holly Metz is a free-lance writer in New Jersey.)