

KOKO – Gorilla Great or Captive Capture

Did you know that humans aren't the only species that use language? Bees communicate by dancing. Whales talk to each other by singing. And some apes talk to humans by using American Sign Language. Meet Koko: a female gorilla born at the San Francisco Zoo on July 4th, 1971, where she has lived ever since.

Koko, Dr. Patterson, and Sign Language

Koko learned sign language from her trainer, Dr. Penny Patterson. Patterson began teaching sign language to Koko in 1972, when Koko was one year old. Koko must have been a good student, because two years later she moved onto the Stanford University campus with Dr. Patterson. Koko continued to learn on the campus until 1976. That's when she began living full-time with Patterson's group, the Gorilla Foundation. Patterson and Koko's relationship has blossomed ever since.

A Gorilla That Communicates?

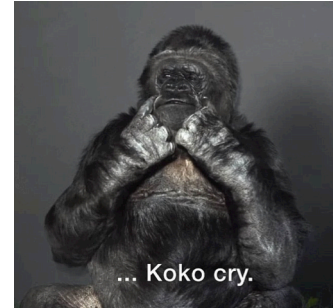
Dr. Patterson says that Koko has mastered sign language. She says that Koko knows over 1,000 words, and that Koko makes up new words. For example, Koko didn't know the sign for *ring*, so she signed the words *finger* and *bracelet*. Dr. Patterson thinks that this shows meaningful and constructive use of language.

Not Everyone Agrees With the Doctor

Not everyone agrees with Dr. Patterson. Some argue that apes like Koko do not understand the meaning of what they are doing. Skeptics say that these apes are just performing complex tricks. For example, if Koko points to an apple and signs *red* or *apple*, Dr. Patterson will give her an apple. They argue that Koko does not really know *what* the sign apple means. She only knows that that if she makes the right motion, one which Dr. Patterson has shown her, then she gets an apple. The debate is unresolved, but one thing is for certain: Koko is an extraordinary ape.

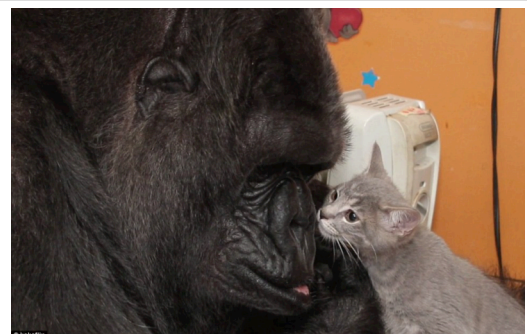
Koko is One Strange Gorilla

Sign language isn't the only unusual thing about Koko. She's also been a pet-owner. In 1983, at the age of 12, researchers said that Koko asked for a cat for Christmas. They gave Koko a stuffed cat. Koko was not happy. She did not play with it, and she continued to sign *sad*. So for her birthday in 1984, they let her pick a cat out of an abandoned litter. Koko picked a gray cat and named him "All Ball."



(Image source: www.dailymail.co.uk)

Koko is able to communicate many words and ideas, including feelings.



(Image source: www.dailymail.co.uk)

Koko is playing with her pet cat, All Ball.

Dr. Patterson said that Koko loved and nurtured All Ball as though he were a baby gorilla. Sadly, All Ball got out of Koko's cage and was hit by a car. Patterson reported that Koko signed "Bad, sad, bad" and "Frown, cry, frown, sad" when she broke the news to her.

Questionable Relationship?

It seems like Patterson and Koko have a good relationship, but not everyone agrees with it. Some critics believe that Patterson is *humanizing* the ape. They believe that apes should be left in the most natural state possible. Even Dr. Patterson struggles with these feelings. When asked if her findings could be *duplicated* by another group of scientists, she said, "We don't think that it would be ethical to do again." She went on to argue that animals should not be kept in such unnatural circumstances. Nonetheless, Koko lives in her foundation today.

As for the future, Dr. Patterson and the Gorilla Foundation would love to get Koko to an ape preserve in Maui, but they are having trouble securing the land. So unless you have a few million dollars to spare, Koko's going to be spending her time in Woodland, California with Dr. Patterson. Koko probably doesn't mind that. If she moved to Hawaii, she'd have to give up her Facebook page and Twitter feed, and she's got like 50 thousand "likes." Some may deny that she knows sign language, but nobody says that she doesn't know social networking.

Who is Doctor Patterson?



Dr. Penny Patterson received her Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from Stanford University where, as a graduate student in 1972, she began working with one-year-old Koko, a western lowland gorilla. In 1976, Dr. Patterson along with a few others established the Gorilla Foundation to benefit gorillas living in captivity and those struggling to survive in Africa, and to continue the dialogue with great apes.

She has published more than 40 scientific publications plus regular books and even award-winning children's books, *Koko's Kitten* and *Koko's Story*. She has earned numerous awards and honors for her work with Koko and male gorillas Michael and Ndume.

For the past couple of decades, has been exploring the limits of interspecies communication with gorillas (Koko and Ndume) in order to provide a resource for improved gorilla care in captivity, and to accelerate gorilla conservation for free-living gorillas in Africa, who are now critically endangered.

(Source: www.koko.org/penny-patterson-phd)