

Women in the Wild

In the first half of the twentieth century, most people thought that great apes were ferocious beasts like King Kong. By the middle of the century, though, a young Englishwoman named Jane Goodall and a young American named Dian Fossey began to change people's minds. By going to live with great apes, Goodall and Fossey taught the world about these gentle giants.

Goodall and Fossey began their careers by following their childhood dreams of working with animals in Africa. In her late twenties, Goodall finally saved up enough money to travel to Cape Town, South Africa, where she met the famous paleontologist Louis Leakey. He hired her as his secretary and by 1960 convinced her to study chimpanzees in the wild. Leakey funded Goodall's expedition to Tanzania, and she took her mother with her. In a speech that Goodall gave in 2002, she said, "I had a wonderful, supportive mother. She encouraged me to follow my ridiculous dream to go to Africa and live with animals ("Jane"). In 1963, Fossey first met Leakey, but she had a harder time impressing him. After paying 14 shillings to look around his dig site, she slipped down a rock slope, landed on his fossil find, sprained her ankle, and because of the pain, threw up on the specimen ("Dian"). Still, by 1966, Leakey had funded an expedition for Fossey to study mountain gorillas in the Congo and Rwanda.

Over the next two decades, Goodall and Fossey became world-renowned primatologists, or ape researchers. Since neither woman was a trained scientist, they shared a unique approach to their research. Instead of numbering the apes like test subjects, the women named them and developed close relationships with them. Goodall discovered that chimpanzees live in extended tribal groups and have individual personalities, emotions, and awareness. Perhaps her most startling discovery, though, was that chimpanzees make tools, stripping leaves off

twigs and using the twigs to “fish” termites from their mounds (Shadow). For her part, Fossey learned that gorillas live in small family groups and show compassion even to non-gorillas. Once, when Fossey crouched alone and depressed in the woods, a gorilla named Digit put his arm around her and comforted her (Gorillas). Over the years, both women discovered that great-ape populations are dwindling because of poaching and habitat loss. At Leakey’s suggestion, Goodall and Fossey each went to Cambridge to earn PhD’s, which helped them fight for the survival of great apes.

Later in their careers, the two women worked hard to save the great apes. Goodall wrote papers and books, traveled and lectured, and created foundations to save chimpanzees and other animals. As a result, the United Nations named her a “Messenger of Peace,” and she was the only non-Tanzanian to receive the Medal of Tanzania (“Biography”). Fossey also did these things, but when the gorilla populations she studied were attacked, she declared a public war on poachers. She put a bounty on any poachers and organized patrols to protect gorillas. In 1985, her war ended when she was murdered in her cabin, most likely by a poacher (“Dian”).

Though Goodall and Fossey were born ten thousand miles apart, each woman followed her dream of going to Africa. They worked with Louis Leakey, wrote and lectured, and set up foundations to save the creatures they loved. Most of all, these two conservationists shared a message that Fossey expressed in her final journal entry: “When you realize the value of all life, you dwell less on what is past and concentrate on the preservation of the future” (“Dian”).