



NONHUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT

Key NhRP Achievements and Legal Firsts

In 2013, the Nonhuman Rights Project (NhRP) filed the first-ever habeas corpus cases on behalf of nonhuman animals—advocating for our chimpanzee clients’ fundamental right to liberty under the common law, followed by their release to a chimpanzee sanctuary where this right would be respected. These cases sparked serious, sustained attention in the legal community, the media, and the public sphere, catalyzing a national and global debate about what nonhuman animals need and are entitled to under the law.

Our chimpanzee clients Hercules and Leo were the first nonhuman animals in the world to have a habeas corpus hearing to determine the lawfulness of their imprisonment. Our elephant client Happy was the first elephant to have a habeas corpus hearing.

In May of 2018, a judge on New York’s highest court wrote that the failure of the New York courts to grapple with the issues the NhRP raises “amounts to a refusal to confront a manifest injustice ... To treat a chimpanzee as if he or she had no right to liberty protected by habeas corpus is to regard the chimpanzee as entirely lacking independent worth, as a mere resource for human use, a thing the value of which consists exclusively in its usefulness to others. Instead, we should consider whether a chimpanzee is an individual with inherent value who has the right to be treated with respect.” Judge Fahey is the first high court judge in the US to hold that “there is no doubt that [a chimpanzee] is not merely a thing.”

Over the course of three days between September of 2019 and January of 2020, Bronx Supreme Court Justice Alison Y. Tuitt heard over 13 hours of arguments on the question of whether our client Happy, as an autonomous being, is entitled to the right to liberty. In February of 2020, Justice Tuitt issued a decision in which she recognized Happy as an autonomous being “who may be entitled to liberty” and rejected the Bronx Zoo’s arguments that it’s in Happy’s best interest to remain imprisoned in the Bronx Zoo.

In May of 2020, the Islamabad High Court in Pakistan relied on the NhRP’s cases in a decision that “without any hesitation” affirmed the rights of nonhuman animals and specifically ordered the release to sanctuary of an elephant named Kaavan who was held in solitary confinement at a zoo.

In May of 2022 in Happy’s case, the New York Court of Appeals became the highest US court and the highest court of any English-speaking jurisdiction to hear a case demanding a legal right for a nonhuman animal. Following this historic hearing, two judges wrote courageous dissents that link “our country’s tortured history of oppression and subjugation” of humans based on immutable characteristics such as race, gender, culture, and national origin to the suffering and



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rightlessness of nonhuman animals. In so doing, Judge Rowan D. Wilson and Judge Jenny Rivera not only challenged an unjust legal status quo that has existed for centuries; they're also helping to light the way to a more just future for members of other species—just as courageous dissents by judges have done for humans throughout US legal history.

In September of 2023, the NhRP helped pass the first animal rights legislation in the US in Ojai, California. Introduced by Ojai City Council Member Leslie Rule and developed with and supported by the NhRP, the local ordinance defines and protects elephants' right to liberty. It expressly recognizes that elephants possess the right to liberty, prohibits any person from preventing elephants from exercising their right to liberty, and details how the law will be enforced and the penalty for violating it.

In June of 2025, a New York court issued a landmark ruling recognizing dogs as immediate family members under state law in certain circumstances. In his opinion in *Deblase v. Hill*, Justice Aaron D. Maslow relied extensively on the [two amicus briefs](#) that NhRP filed in the case, which was brought by a woman who was walking her son's dog on a leash when a negligent motorist struck and killed the dog. The woman sought damages for negligent infliction of emotional distress, which applies when a plaintiff suffers emotional distress from witnessing an injury to an immediate family member. In this instance, the court found that the dog qualified as an immediate family member.

In January of 2026, the NhRP filed the first lawsuit in the US seeking recognition that animals have a legal right to be free from cruelty. The habeas corpus case petitioned the Dane County Circuit Court in Wisconsin to enforce the right of approximately 2,000 beagle dogs at puppy mill Ridglan Farms, Inc., to be free from alleged mistreatment that violated the state's animal cruelty law. Ridglan was breeding the beagles to sell for use in research in spite of a judge's finding of probable cause that it violated anti-cruelty laws and a special prosecutor's finding of sufficient evidence to charge it with criminal animal cruelty. The Circuit Court refused to act, though the judge recognized that in 50 or 100 years people may wonder what he was thinking in denying the dogs relief. NhRP filed an appeal in the Wisconsin Court of Appeals, where the case is now pending.