

LONG ISLAND

Some Say Pet Shop Monkey Was Liberated, Not Stolen

By ROBERT D. McFADDEN

To her owners at a squawking, growling, slithering jungle pet shop in West Islip, N.Y., Annie, a 27-year-old Vietnamese stump-tail macaque, had been almost a member of the family. She was bottle fed as an infant, allowed to swim in the family pool and tended with loving care and, though caged like the pythons and the alligators, was never for sale.

But to animal rights advocates, Annie was a victim of barbarous cruelty, imprisoned for decades in isolation and squalor, fed an improper diet that included pizza and Chinese takeout and denied the opportunity to interact with members of her own species — a languishing, depressed primate who finally even lost interest in her slide and tire swing.

There were numerous complaints and denials and visits by representatives of animal protection groups and Government inspectors, but no substantive action was taken — until Friday, when persons unknown broke into B. T. J.'s Jungle Pets on Sunrise Highway in the dead of night and made off with the 35-pound, rust-colored monkey.

Nothing else was taken from the shop, which sells reptiles, exotic birds and fish, prairie dogs and snakes as well as dogs, cats and other pets. The Suffolk County police said they had no suspects in the burglary, but a shadowy animal rights group yesterday was claiming responsibility for it.

"Annie is finally free from exploitation and humiliation," the North American Animal Liberation Front declared in a notice faxed to news media. It called itself "a worldwide underground organization dedicated to strategic nonviolent direct action aimed at all forms of the animal-abuse industry."

Barbara Stagno, the northeast director of another group, In Defense of Animals, who had been a prominent voice recently in complaining about the conditions in which Annie was kept, said yesterday that she had received an anonymous call about the time of the burglary from a man who told her the monkey had been liberated.

In a telephone interview from Yonkers, Ms. Stagno said that, because

complaints had not led to "the necessary steps to insure Annie's health and safety," she fully supported Annie's "removal." In response to questions, she insisted that she did not know any members of the front, had nothing to do with the theft and did not know where, or how, Annie was being kept.

"Wherever she is now, we are certain she is much better off than when she was incarcerated in the pet store," Ms. Stagno said. "The brave people who liberated Annie deserve our congratulations, not our condemnation."

The proprietors of the store — brothers, Bill, Tom and John Niehoff — were not there yesterday, but Denise Coppola, 30, who has worked there for 10 years and said she was reflecting the owners' views, was outspoken in her beliefs about the disappearance of Annie.

"There is a woman, Barbara Stagno — she is behind the kidnapping of our pet monkey," Ms. Coppola said. "I don't think she came to the premises to remove her, but she had the Animal Liberation Front do it."

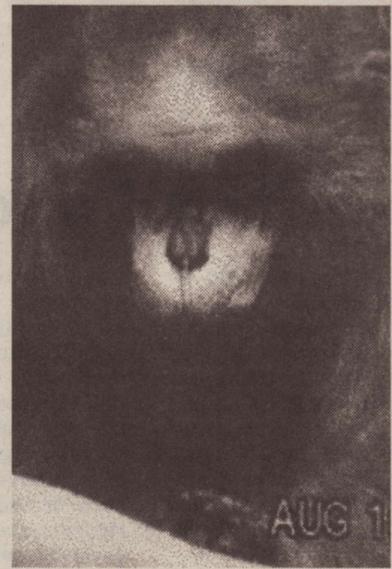
Ms. Coppola denied that Annie had

A controversy over whether she was loved or mistreated.

been kept in inadequate conditions. On the contrary, she said, the animal had been kept in a clean cage and fed nutritious fruits and other appropriate foods.

"Barbara couldn't get anywhere legally because nothing was wrong," Ms. Coppola said, "so this was the only way she could get back at us."

Ms. Stagno said there had been abundant evidence that Annie had not been kept properly. She cited an inspection by the United States Department of Agriculture in 1997 that found Annie's cage — 8 feet long, 7 feet wide and 10 feet high — littered with feces, soiled bedding, old fruit, a Chinese food container and other debris. Later Government reports, she



Annie, a 35-pound, rust-colored Southeast Asian monkey, was taken from a Long Island pet shop.

said, described fruit flies on the walls and not even a sleeping perch above the floor.

A visit last July by a veterinarian sympathetic to the aims of animal rights groups, Dr. Tatty M. Hodge, of Castleton, N.Y., found the conditions in which Annie was being kept "deplorable, cruel and inhumane" — a cage full of flies, littered with styrofoam containers from leftover takeout food and "a moldy piece of pizza in the corner."

On her own visit on Aug. 12, Ms. Stagno said, a sleeping perch had been added to the cage, along with "enrichment items" like a log to climb on, but Annie still seemed "very depressed," reflecting earlier reports that said the macaque "rocked back and forth, didn't play, didn't interact with people who came up and looked at her."

Still, no formal actions were taken, Ms. Stagno said. Referring to Annie's theft, she said it was "a shame that it had to happen like this," adding: "I would have preferred that Annie would have been removed by more legal channels."

She said the Animal Liberation Front would not be likely to release Annie into the wild because she had spent her life in captivity, far from the native habitat of her species in Southeast Asia. Nor would she be kept in a cage, but rather in "some kind of an enclosure," perhaps a spacious, fenced-in outdoor area. And, she said, her new keepers might try to "acclimatize her to living with other members of her species."