



John Mitani

The Leakey Foundation Oral History of Human Origins Research: John Mitani

Interview conducted by
Bernard Wood
In 2024

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Interview: 05/07/2024

Bernard Wood (00:00:07):

Okay. John Mitani. John, many thanks for doing this for us. Could you begin, as we have done all the interviews, could you let us know your last position and what you are doing now and how you would like us to refer to you?

John Mitani (00:00:30):

I am retired now, formerly, I was a professor at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. And I'm happy to be called what you always call me, John.

Bernard Wood (00:00:41):

Okay. Could you tell me something about your family background? Where did you spend your childhood? Let's begin with that and then I'll ask about your family, your parents, and your siblings.

John Mitani (00:00:57):

Okay. I grew up in California. If you want to go back a little further, my grandparents, both of my maternal and paternal grandparents immigrated from Japan. Both of my parents were born in America, as was I. And I'm a born and bred Californian through and through.

Bernard Wood (00:01:19):

And your parents, what did your mother do? What did your father do?

John Mitani (00:01:24):

My mother was a housewife and my father, after the war, second World War, developed a farming business in the Salinas Valley with his two brother-in-laws, my two mother's brothers.

Bernard Wood (00:01:43):

And that was a farming business? Is that what

John Mitani (00:01:46):

I It was an agri business. They grew vegetables in Steinbeck's Salinas Valley.

Bernard Wood (00:01:55):

And did you have brothers and sisters?

John Mitani (00:01:57):

I have two brothers. One older, one younger, all retired.

Bernard Wood (00:02:03):

Okay. And so neither your father or your mother had an academic background?

John Mitani (00:02:11):

No. They were Japanese American being on the West Coast. Both my mother and father were interned during the Second World War in and around high school age, so they never had an opportunity to go to college. And along with my two brothers we're all first generation students as a result.

Bernard Wood (00:02:33):

Okay. And were you and your brothers equally academic or were you the scholar of the family?

John Mitani (00:02:46):

I'm the oddball. What I would refer to myself as the oddball we're all different. My older brother became a farmer, like my father went into the agricultural business. My younger brother was a very successful, well, my older brother was quite successful too. But my younger brother was an architect just recently retired a few months ago. And for reasons that I suppose, I'll tell you in a second, I became this oddball academic.

Bernard Wood (00:03:20):

And was that obvious when you were at middle school or Joe?

John Mitani (00:03:27):

Oh, no, no, not at all. I had no special interest in animals or human evolution when I was younger, but there was a defining moment that I can vividly recall. It was in my senior year of high school. My parents, for reasons that are still unclear to me, purchased a National Geographic book for my younger brother, not me. It was called The Marvels of Animal Behavior and being a National Geographic book, it was full of all these glorious pictures of exotic animals in far away lands. I opened the book, I got to the book first, got to the mailbox first, opened it up, started thumbing through it, and I just, it's a National Geographic publication, no internet back in the day. This is the way we found things out and learned things. And I just opened the book up and just was enchanted. And added bonus was that all the chapters were written by the leaders in the field. Some of the people I became friends and colleagues with in later years. And the book was actually put together by my postdoctoral supervisor, Peter Marler.

Bernard Wood (00:04:48):

I didn't realize there was such a book. Those publications had an extraordinary wide influence, the National Geographic and the Time Life series. I mean, they've been mentioned by several of the interviewees

John Mitani (00:05:11):

Later on when I was a undergraduate, Clark Howell's Fossil Man, one of those Time Life publications as well as, actually there was another one Primates put together by Irv DeVore were quite influential too. And I think getting me started. But it really was this National Geographic publication. They didn't put out that many books. I think it seemed to be a special volume. But I ended up stealing the book from my younger brother. I still have it on my bookshelf today.

Bernard Wood (00:05:47):

And what sort of age was this?

John Mitani (00:05:49):

I was a senior in high school. And if I can go on, the next thing that really happened is that I went off to college to the University of California, Berkeley. And I discovered that Sherry Washburn, one of the founding fathers of the modern study of primatology, was teaching there at the time. I just took a few classes from him and got hooked. Never looked back.

Bernard Wood (00:06:17):

Give me a little sort of sketch of Sherry Washburn. I had the good fortune to meet him when I went to UC Berkeley a few times to see Clark Howell. But give me your sense of what he was like as a teacher and how he influenced you.

John Mitani (00:06:39):

Well, he was an elder statesman by the time I got there. And he was a wonderful lecturer, had great stories, just a wonderful teacher in so many ways. I used to go talk to him in office hours all the time and just engaging in so many ways. And it was really him, along with many others that got me started in the right direction.

Bernard Wood (00:07:12):

Okay. And when you, you've already said he was an elder statesman. What enabled you to pluck up the courage to go and knock on his door and ask him questions or whatever you did?

John Mitani (00:07:27):

I don't know. I guess I'm just one of those kinds of people who are not embarrassed and not intimidated. I was always a little shocked sometimes when students would come to me quite meekly in my office hours and intrude on my time. And it wasn't an intrusion at all. That's what I'm there for. I'm getting paid to do this. Don't be shy. And I was not that kind of person for some reason. I don't know, part of my character and demeanor.

Bernard Wood (00:07:58):

And what was your major?

John Mitani (00:08:01):

Oh, once I started to take these classes, I was hooked immediately and majored in anthropology.

Bernard Wood (00:08:09):

Okay. And that meant at that time doing also the rest of the four fields?

John Mitani (00:08:17):

Yes. But there were very minimal requirements. You're challenging me to think back to the place to see. There were really minimal requirements, maybe one lower division course in each of the subfields and maybe one upper division course in each of the subfields. So I spent most of my time taking animal behavior classes and anthropology classes, biological anthropology, evolutionary anthropology classes.

Bernard Wood (00:08:49):

And the animal behavior classes. Who taught that?

John Mitani (00:08:57):

Steve Glickman. You may not know that name. He was a um,

Bernard Wood (00:09:00):

I've heard the name

John Mitani (00:09:02):

Comparative Psychologist in psychology for many years. Ended up studying wild dogs, had a colony of wild dogs up on the hill, Berkeley Hills. Thelma Rowell of all people was around teaching at the time. So yeah, it wasn't a big and vibrant group, but still there were things to do. Phyllis Dolhinow, one of Sherry's early students was the resident primatologist at the time in anthropology and I took at least one class that I have a vague recollection of from her, the intro primate behavior class. But I was really there. I was really lucky to be at Berkeley during what I consider to be the heyday of evolutionary / biological anthropology. You've already said Clark Howell was there, took a class or two from him. Desmond Clark, Glynn Isaac, were archaeologists there. I took several classes with Professor Isaac. Wonderful man, wonderful teacher.

Bernard Wood (00:10:11):

Yes, yes. I mean, it's really difficult to convey to people how the center of gravity of Paleoanthropology was very firmly based in Berkeley.

John Mitani (00:10:28):

Well, and then yet another person who really heavily influenced me was Vince Sarich, who was just beginning his studies of molecular evolution developing the molecular clock.

Bernard Wood (00:10:42):

And could you tell us a little bit about Vince, because it's clear that he had an enormous influence on people and David Pilbeam who we interviewed before. He also mentioned Vince. What did Vince look like from the perspective of an undergraduate?

John Mitani (00:11:09):

Well, he was a towering figure, both figuratively and literally. What was he? About six six? So he was quite an imposing figure. But there too, I don't know. I would go in and hound him all the time in his office hours too. And he would just sit patiently there listening to me and my questions, and not always answering them. There would be times when he would look

at me. I'll always remember this. And he used to say to me, well, I don't know, and I'm not sure I'll ever know. And that was very unsatisfying to me as an undergraduate thinking the world is my oyster and everything and anything should be answerable. But Vince taught me early on - I didn't realize at the time - that there are just some things out there that I'll never know and become happy with.

Bernard Wood (00:12:08):

You have to be comfortable with that and try and avoid the temptation to come up with answers that are not appropriate

John Mitani (00:12:19):

Or just might be out of grasp currently.

Bernard Wood (00:12:23):

Sure, Sure,

John Mitani (00:12:23):

But I just remember being dumbfounded when he used to say that to me over and over and over again. And I said, what's the matter with you? I didn't say that to him. I just thought that to myself. Wait, we should be able to figure this out. Well, I've learned over time and many trial and error that through trial and error, that there are just some things out there that I'll never knew. And I'm happy with that, comfortable with that now.

Bernard Wood (00:12:58):

And so where does this sort of take us in terms of time? When did you finish your undergraduate degree?

John Mitani (00:13:05):

I was an undergraduate in the early to mid 1970s, so I graduated in 1976.

Bernard Wood (00:13:15):

And did you apply to graduate school or did you contemplate doing something else?

John Mitani (00:13:22):

I took a year off and then I enrolled in graduate school at Davis in 1978.

Bernard Wood (00:13:31):

Why did you choose there?

John Mitani (00:13:36):

Parochial reasons. Probably. I'm a Californian and I didn't think there was anything outside of California. Davis was close. I ran up there one day to meet Peter Rodman, who was the resident primatologist there at the time. Peter just completed one of the first successful field studies of orangutans, and we had a nice chat. It was a heyday of sociobiology. Peter was a graduate student fresh from Harvard, being trained by Irv Devore and Ed Wilson, and

he was this repository of all this new and exciting knowledge about this new field. So it was a no brainer for me. I think I also applied to Berkeley. I wasn't admitted, but it was a good decision to go away.

Bernard Wood (00:14:31):

And did you know what you were going to do as a graduate student when you applied to the program?

John Mitani (00:14:37):

I thought I knew. This is early days in the study of primatology. For the most part all that everyone was doing was studying baboons in open country. And I had this image of myself doing the same. What I wanted to do. Again, this is an influence of events, it got me interested in genetics. I thought I could use some incipient genetic techniques that had been developed during the day, mostly starch gel electrophoresis, and use these genetic techniques to inform me and others about who's related to whom and the baboon group, and use that to test ideas regarding kin selection theory, which was becoming all the rage back in the time due largely to sociobiology. So that was sort of the image I had in my mind going to graduate school. But things change. Things changed entirely due to Peter. He had a grant to study the comparative ecology and behavior of Bornean Primates at the site he had established. And one day at the end of my first year of graduate school, he just waltzed up to me in the hall and asked me if I wanted to go to born of the next year with him.

(00:16:01):

And I said, sure, yeah, why not?

Bernard Wood (00:16:05):

Could you help us understand what the ecology of primatology was like? I mean, there was Jane Goodall, there was Dian Fossey, there was Birute Galdikas. Who else? And you and the Altmann's were already working on baboons.

John Mitani (00:16:28):

The Altmann's had started their long-term project, which continues to this stay at Amboseli in Kenya in the early seventies. So that was certainly ongoing. Irv had pretty much left the field, the- study of baboons, by the time I started my own work. But there were several other people studying the baboons. Quite a collection of graduate students at Berkeley when I was an undergraduate were working on the baboons. Some work on langurs in India. The study of tropical primates, however, was lagging far behind, and there's an obvious reason for that. And that's because they're really hard to study. They're high up in the trees hidden by foliage. Just much harder to do. The one person who will undoubtedly come up in this discussion and who was actively working on tropical primates at the time, and I did not know at the time was Tom Strusaker, who developed a long-term study of red colobus monkeys in Uganda in the early 1970s.

Bernard Wood (00:17:37):

And then what was his, did he come from, what was his graduate education and how did get to the colobus?

John Mitani (00:17:49):

Tom was actually a graduate student. Maybe let me back up a bit. Okay. I completed my undergraduate degree at Davis with Peter Rodman, who really was responsible for giving me a start in this field. I went on to do postdoctoral research at the Rockefeller University working with Peter Marler.

Bernard Wood (00:18:13):

Okay, I was going to ask you about that. And that's where Peter Marler was. And he was more of a psychologist than a primatologist, or am I wrong?

John Mitani (00:18:26):

I'm not sure Peter would ever consider himself a primatologist. He actually has two degrees. He was a poor boy from England who was a lover of birds in youth and convinced himself, I can never make a living studying birds. So he went and got his first degree in botany - PhD in botany. He was working as a professional botanist for the Nature Conservancy. And then three people came along. Bill Thorpe, who was a leader in the study of animal behavior in Britain, and two other people you will know - Konrad Lorenz and J.B.S. Haldane. That was his committee. So it was Haldane and Lorenz who convinced him that, well, maybe you can do this. So he went off and got a second degree in zoology at Cambridge. After finishing his degree, he couldn't get a job in Britain, so he emigrated to the United States, and got his first job at Berkeley. I often think that was probably one of the greatest losses that the UK suffered since the loss of the Revolutionary War. But going back now, you asked about Tom. Tom was one of his early graduate students at Berkeley. So we're all terribly inbred.

Bernard Wood (00:19:51):

And how did the Rockefeller University get mixed up with Marler and primatology?

John Mitani (00:20:01):

Well, that's an interesting question in its own right, because you probably recognize that Rockefeller is largely a biomedical institution. It remains so to this day. But my understanding is that in the sixties, they were trying to develop themselves into a real university, a broad-based university that expanded far beyond the medical realm. So they're bringing in psychologists, philosophers. It was about that time that Peter and Don Griffin, I'm not sure you know that name, Don was an animal behaviorist, best known for discovering bat echolocation before the war, before the second World War, at a time that we humans hadn't even developed radar. But they approached, the New York Zoo actually approached Don and Peter to come and build a research program for them. They were both inclined to do so, but they said that, well, we'd like to have an academic appointment. And this coincided at a time when Rockefeller was building other lines of inquiry, academic inquiry. So someone approached Rockefeller, and they said, fine, come on board. As things turn out, that research group with the zoo dissolved, more or less. It morphed into WCS and their conservation organization, which exists today. And Peter and Don just moved entirely into Rockefeller where they spent the rest of their careers.

Bernard Wood (00:21:46):

And then you were there as a postdoc?

John Mitani (00:21:49):

I was there as a postdoc. Peter was largely, he was an animal behaviorist, trained in the classical ethological tradition. And he was best known for pretty much writing the book on how male birds learn to sing their songs. But during what I consider a midlife crisis - the way Peter told me the story is that Sherry Washburn came over to his office in Berkeley one day, and Sherry told him, oh, we're writing this book about primates, and we'd like you to write a chapter about primate vocal communication. Peter said he looked at him and he said, I've never seen a primate in the wild before. That didn't stop him from writing the chapter, but it piqued his interest in primates. So during midlife, he did a series of studies investigating the vocal behavior of East African primates largely in Uganda. And he also did a stint with Jane Goodall at Gombe investigating the vocal behavior of chimpanzees. And this, I'm sure we'll talk about this, but Peter is the one who led me to chimpanzees.

Bernard Wood (00:23:11):

Okay. But he might have led you to chimpanzees, but there were a lot of gibbons in your life.

John Mitani (00:23:24):

That's correct. So in graduate school, when Peter Rodman offered me this chance to accompany him to Borneo that morphed me into an Asian primatologist or student of Asian primates. So I was searching for a thesis topic and I had always admired Niko Tinbergen,

(00:23:56):

another classically trained Dutch ethologist, probably best known for developing experiments to test functional questions about why animals do the things that they do. And I was always fascinated in Tinbergen's work, and I used that as a vehicle to do my early work, largely experimental work, investigating the mating and spacing behavior of gibbons and orangutans. So that was all done during my graduate career. I later took... In those days I was using the sounds that gibbons and orangutans were making to simulate their presence so I can manipulate the situations and quite literally ask them questions about why are you behaving in a territorial fashion? Instead of just trying to rely on natural occurrences where gibbons are flying through the treetops at breakneck speed, 40 meters above you where you could barely see anything. Using this playback design, I could actually pick and choose when to create these territorial encounters. So I was happily going along doing that. But toward the end, if anybody has heard gibbon singing behavior, to my mind it's the finest music and all of Southeast Asia. And it was hard not to become interested in the sounds themselves. So that led me to do postdoctoral research with Peter Marler, who was pretty much the preeminent scholar investigating the vocal behavior of animals at the time.

Bernard Wood (00:25:52):

So how did you get that job? Was it advertised or did Peter Rodman pick up the phone and talk to Peter Marler or....

John Mitani (00:26:02):

Yeah, things were done very differently back in those days. Peter Rodman, toward the end of my graduate career when I was finishing up my thesis just got on the telephone called Peter Marler up. Apparently intrigued him. Peter Marler asked me to come out and conduct not really even a formal interview. But I had a nice chat with him, talked to some of his other postdocs and members of his laboratory. I ended up writing a NIH postdoc to fund my research, and things took off from there. I went there initially trying to figure out what male gibbons were doing when they were singing to each other, again using experiments to probe the structure and function of the songs that they were singing. But then I will always remember this, Peter was a wonderful mentor. Both of my Peters. Rodman and Marler. They always had open doors.

(00:27:06):

I could always waltz in and talk to them as I probably intruded on Washburn and Sarich's life when I was younger. But I would always go to Peter Marler and talk to him largely about the things I was doing with gibbons. But I have these vivid memories of somehow, some way the conversation always morphing and drifting off to chimpanzees. He would find a way to lead the discussion to chimps and the times he spent with chimps. So after several years of listening to these discussions - at any time, it was about 12 years. I was getting a little tired of working with gibbons and orangutans, and I thought that I was up for a new challenge. So it really was Peter Marler who nudged me to the study of chimps.

Bernard Wood (00:28:09):

Okay. So how does somebody who is very successfully done a postdoc, how do you morph into a chimp person? How do you find a site? How do you finance it? How do you assemble colleagues?

John Mitani (00:28:28):

A lot of luck and serendipity. That's something I haven't mentioned thus far. I've always looked at my research career as being somebody who's led a charmed life, being around at the right time and around the right people. This is a very different time. Primatology when I started, there weren't that many primatologists around. The modern study of primatology to my mind begins in the late fifties through the work of Kenji Imanishi in Japan and Washburn here in America. So by the time I get started in the late seventies, it wasn't - there were very few practicing primatologists and that remained so for several years. So I've always felt lucky that I got in on the ground floor. So when I made this decision to switch, as you recognize, one has to fund the research, and one has to find a study site. With regard to the second issue, there I imposed myself on the life of Toshisada Nishida, who began in 1965, the second successful long-term field study of chimpanzees at the Mahale Mountains in Tanzania, just south down Lake Tanganyika from Gombe, where Jane had worked for so many years - Jane and others have worked for so many years.

(00:30:00):

On one trip back from Borneo, from Indonesia, I made a stop in Japan and just wrote to Toshi and asked if I could meet with him. And he graciously arranged to meet with me.

(00:30:18):

We barely were able to communicate with each other because he didn't speak very good English at the time. He had to bring two of his graduate students to act as translators. I later met Toshi at a professional meeting here in America.

Bernard Wood (30:32):

How is your Japanese?

It's nonexistent. I attribute that to my parents' experience in the war. They both spoke Japanese. But I think coming out of that, what I recognize now is that coming out of that experience, what they wanted to do was integrate into American society. So it's a lifelong regret that I didn't learn the language, but they never pushed my brothers and me to learn the language. Nishida never understood. He was always befuddled why I couldn't speak the language. I think toward the end of his life, I finally convinced him or explained to him why I looked the part, but I don't speak the part.

Bernard Wood (00:31:30):

And this was in Kyoto.

John Mitani (00:31:34):

Oh, that's an interesting point. He was actually teaching at Tokyo at the time, although his wife was living in Kyoto, and he was down in Kyoto the night the day I arrived and had to bullet train all the way up to Tokyo to meet me, a graduate student nobody. And I only learned of those years later after we started to work together. But going back to finally answer your question about finding a study site, having this relationship with Nishida, I think we invited him to Rockefeller too, he again made another visit. And as I was planning things, we invited him to Rockefeller to visit, which he did. And he invited me with open arms to work with him at Mahale, which was incredibly fortuitous and serendipitous because Toshi an amazing scholar. He was a very keen and astute observer of chimps. He taught me a lot about their behavior and ecology, and I owe a lot of my research and knowledge of chimps to him during those early days.

(00:32:59):

When we worked together at Mahale. You asked the funding question, and it just seemed to be easier to obtain grants back in the day. Again, the field wasn't as crowded as it is today. It wasn't as competitive, and I had a lot of help. I funded, I was an extended postdoc at Rockefeller for about five years and existed entirely on soft money. I was appointed as an assistant professor to the faculty at Rockefeller, but with no salary. Becoming an assistant professor at Rockefeller amounted to Peter calling me into his office one day and saying, you're an assistant professor.

Bernard Wood (00:33:52):

He must have been what we now call HR. He must have been an HR nightmare.

John Mitani (00:34:00):

Well, boy, I did some crazy things back in the day that I look back on and wonder. Yeah, I would never get away with doing the kinds of things that I did. I spent a field season studying the mountain gorillas at Karisoke in Rwanda, Dian Fossey's study site. And I was doing so the year before the genocide when there was a civil, ongoing civil war. And daily we can hear bombs going off in the distance, but they're way across the valley. And it just seemed light years away. And it was quite clear to me at the time that they were staying away from the gorillas. Both sides were very carefully staying away from the research site and anywhere near the gorillas. And one of the more remarkable things about that civil war is that even through the genocide that only a single gorilla was killed. And I know for a fact that was an accident.

(00:35:01):

That was an accident created by one soldier wandering around the forest one night for reasons that are unexplained. But he ran into a group of sleeping gorillas. A male silverback, got up, excited, started to call, probably maybe even charge around. The guy shot first and asked questions later. But yeah, it was quite clear that both sides, the warring factions were staying away from the gorillas because they knew that whoever won was going to inherit the tourism dollars being generated by those guys at the time. I think it still might be true that tourism to gorillas is one of the biggest earners of hard currency in the entire country. It brings in millions of dollars, so good reasons to protect those gorillas.

Bernard Wood (00:35:58):

And so just to go back to Mahale and Nishida, when did you develop your own research project? Initially, your research project was sort of within the umbrella of Nishida?

John Mitani (00:36:15):

Yes, so I went to study chimpanzees initially to investigate their vocal behavior. At the time, there was very little known about the vocal behavior of chimpanzees and for that matter, all the other great apes. And I can recall gearing up to do that study where everybody was trying to convince me, oh, I was going to go out and find that they're carrying on conversations like you and I are doing here and communicating in a very sophisticated fashion. These are my primatological colleagues. I quickly convinced myself, no, they're not doing anything remotely similar to us. And that's why I pretty much dropped that line of investigation. But dropping that line of investigation happened with another twist and major turn in my research career, and that's the development of the Ngogo chimpanzee research project in Uganda.

Bernard Wood (00:37:16):

Tell us how that came about.

John Mitani (00:37:19):

Again, like much of my research career, entirely accidental, I was at a gathering of great ape researchers, a Wenner-Gren conference. David Watts was there. David was studying gorillas, mountain gorillas at the time at Dian Fossey's study site, but he was contemplating making a move and change to the study of chimpanzees at the time. And he was talking

about maybe going off and visiting the site called Ngogo in the middle of Kibale National Park in southwest Uganda next year to maybe try to get something going. When I caught wind of this at this meeting, I asked David if I could tag along because I had known about Kibale through Tom, Tom Struhsaker's work there

Bernard Wood (00:38:15):

From monkeys.

John Mitani (00:38:16):

It was and still is one of the premier primate field research sites in all the world. I knew Tom because of his relationship with Peter Marler. I sort of already felt as if I was part of the Kibale family, and I always wanted to visit. So I went, and it was really designed as a vacation just to see the place. I had every intention when I went to in Ngogo for the very first time that I would be back the following year studying chimpanzees at Mahale with Nishida, who I had developed a wonderful working relationship and friendship. But it took me only a very few days being at Ngogo to realize there's something really strange about this place, and the strange thing was that there were chimps and they were everywhere.

(00:39:16):

The group was ginormous, it was just gigantic. Chimps here, there, everywhere. It was easy to find and follow them, in retrospect, we were there at a lucky time when there was an abundance of food, which led to chimps congregating and these humongous parties. An added bonus was that Tom came out that first summer, and I spent many days just walking the forest with him, just pumping him for knowledge, trying to ask him questions. Every question that I could think of about Ngogo, the site which he had established previously, Kibale, the National Park, which he had also helped establish in the country of Uganda where he'd worked for nearly 20 or so years. We'd go out and take what Tom used to call these nature walks, and he was just a font of knowledge. And I look back on that at those times as some of my fondest memories I've ever spent in the forest being with anybody.

Bernard Wood (00:40:29):

Could you give us a sense of, people talk about Kibale, it's a national park, it's a forest. There is more than one study site there. Could you just sort of paint a picture of what it's like?

John Mitani (00:40:51):

Tom Struhsaker established research at this site at a place called Kanyawara, which is located in the northern end of the park. And it was there that he set up his primary study of red colobus monkeys that went on for about 18 years. Somewhere about four years after that. He set things up in 1971. In 1975, he thought it might be good to set up a secondary site within the forest, within the bounds of the forest reserve as it was then called the Kibale Forest Reserve. And he wanted to set up a secondary site to get some comparative information about red colobus and red tail monkeys, which he had always - was already studying as well. And that site was Ngogo, which is located in the middle of the park in contrast to Kanyawara. Somewhere down the line in the 1980s or so, Richard Wrangham showed up to set up his long-term study of chimpanzees at Kanyawara, where Tom was primarily operating. But also before Richard began his work, in the late 1970s Mike

Ghiglieri, who turned out to be a graduate student of Peter Marler*, my own graduate advisor at Davis, tried to conduct a study of the Ngogo chimpanzees.

***Mike Ghiglieri was actually a graduate student of Peter Rodman, not Peter Marler.**

(00:42:31):

He wasn't very successful. Mike wasn't very successful because he was never able to really habituate the chimps. So they were constantly running away from him. And with the chimps constantly running away from you, it's fairly difficult to obtain reliable observations and information. Bettina Grieser Johns, another British researcher, made another stab at studying the Ngogo chimps briefly in the early 1990s, right before we arrived in 1995. So we benefited from these other attempts at trying to set something up at Ngogo. But going back again to that first visit, I was just simply amazed at how many chimps there were. Richard Wrangham, had been down to Ngogo and had gotten a sense that something unusual was going on - that there was this giant community of chimps at Ngogo, and he had urged David to go down there and subsequently was very supportive of me as well. But during that very first summer when I was starting to take all this in, like I said, it didn't take long for me to realize that something unusual is going on here. So at the end of that first summer, I just sat down with David and asked him if he would be willing to collaborate on starting a project. He said yes, and the rest now 30 years later is history.

Bernard Wood (00:44:16):

The rest is history. Right. And so you sort of collaboration was really with David Watts

John Mitani (00:44:25):

That started and it started with the development of the Ngogo chimpanzee project right from the very start.

Bernard Wood (00:44:33):

Okay. What did each of you bring to that collaboration? I mean, were your backgrounds very similar or did you have different backgrounds and different strengths?

John Mitani (00:44:49):

Well, I brought this experimental approach, which I immediately dropped when I started to study on Ngogo chimps. David had a long history. I forget how long he had worked with mountain gorillas. We brought a wealth of field work experience. I think I benefited, I know I benefited by having six years of previous field, five or six years of previous field experience working with chimps at Mahale. So I had this understanding of how they operated, how they came together at times and would split apart. So I think I had a leg up on David at the start, but David is an accomplished field worker and was a very quick study and caught up very quickly. But we were, and we just brought excitement and enthusiasm to this project. We were both gung-ho about doing it despite the fact we were both in our forties. There were times in those early days when we were still trying to habituate the chimps to our presence where I wondered whether doing this was the best use of my time. But I know that given the way we committed to try to do this, we were able - and also given the prior

history of work there - we were able to accomplish the habituation process a lot quicker than many others.

Bernard Wood (00:46:35):

And I remember going to visit Richard Wrangham in the north of the Kibale National Park, and my memory was that the forest was sort of broken up into blocks. And was that the work of Tom or was that the work of Richard?

John Mitani (00:47:00):

Well, again, when Tom arrived in the early 1970s, it was a forest reserve, and it was completely legal to log. And people did. You may, I don't know when you arrived, but you may have seen some pine plantations that were planted at Kanyawara at Richard and Tom's site. It was an active logging, there were active logging operations in the early days. Through Tom's work though, however, he got the Ugandan government to recognize the area as a national park, which then changed things. We operate in a very different area in Ngogo. Despite the fact it's only 10 kilometers as the crow flies from Kanyawara, it's an entirely different situation. There is no logging at the site. So much of the site is covered by primary rainforest. That shouldn't lead you to believe that it's completely untouched because people were there in the early part of the 20th century, 1920s as recently as 1920, 1930s. And everybody left voluntarily the Ngogo study area where we operate voluntarily in the 1930s because of tsetse flies, and people haven't been back since. But because of this, there are still some pockets of grasslands in our Ngogo study site, which are largely due to the fact that they were farmed many years ago and repeatedly burned over the years by hunters who will come in and try to flush out small game primarily duiker, small forest duiker.

Bernard Wood (00:49:05):

I mean, my experience, I think I spent three days with Richard, and it was a magical experience, but the attraction of having ants sort of crawling up your legs and watching chimpanzees, I mean, what was really fascinating for me was that their behavior at the beginning of the day was rather different from their behavior in the afternoon. And I sort of kept thinking that if these were early hominins, how would you describe their diet? Would it be what they ate in the morning or what they ate in the afternoon? And which of those things would have more of an impact on their hard tissues? So it was a very useful experience for me. But explain to me what is so magical about spending weeks in a tropical forest.

John Mitani (00:50:15):

What year were you at Kanyawara?

Bernard Wood (00:50:18):

I can't remember. I thought you might ask me that, but it was probably, I don't know. It was probably in the nineties.

John Mitani (00:50:26):

So it was fairly early on. But yeah, going on to that point about chimps eating different things early in the morning versus late at night. I did this study several years ago with Bryce Carlson, who's out of the business now, but one of John Kingston's former graduate students at Emory when John was back at Emory. And he was interested in the nutritional composition of leaves, thinking that it might change on a daily schedule. So Bryce did this heroic, if not very tedious study, of clipping leaves off the same tree during different times of the day. You can just go back to the same sapling or tree and clip off different leaves at certain prescribed times throughout a diurnal cycle. And one of the things we learned from that is that the nutritional composition of those leaves changes during the daytime. So early in the morning when there's no light, photosynthesis hasn't kicked in. As the day progresses, and with more and more sun, more sugars develop in plants. So it may not come as a surprise is that one of the things that we see at Ngogo is that they tend to top up at the end of the day with leaves perhaps because of that changing nutritional composition. I think there have been studies of livestock, captive livestock, cows. If you give them a choice of hay cut early in the morning versus hay cut later in the day, they would quite reliably choose that hay cut later in the day.

(00:52:28):

But I forgot, I'm sorry. I tend to go off on tangents. No, no, no. But you asked me about what's magical about being with chimps. There's really nothing that I like better to do than just spend long times in the field with these animals. There is something magical. It's almost a religious, spiritual-like experience. I can't tell you how many times I've been with chimps. Imagine for a minute you're out with me. It's a glorious sunlit day. And we can be with 20, 30, 40, if you're out in Ngogo maybe even 50, 60, 70 chimps. It's the middle of the day. Chimps are lazy. People don't understand this. They'll use every and any opportunity to just sleep, and they will. Everybody thinks this is glamorous work. Most of the time you're just watching an animal sleep. Middle of the day, everybody's sacked out or the vast majority of them might be sleeping. A few might be socializing, grooming each other. There's likely to be a few kids playing and making noise off in the distance. And I can't tell you how many times I find myself in a situation like that and I just am dumbfounded that they've accepted me in their lives and allow me to share all this with them.

(00:54:01):

It it's indescribable. So I'm very thankful for....

Bernard Wood (00:54:08):

So if we accept the premise that sort of being a primatologist and especially, I mean we're talking about chimps, what sort of qualities do you have to have as a primatologist? You are obviously a very accomplished biologist who happens to work on vocalization and then laterally on chimps, but what sort of qualities does a successful primatologist need to have?

John Mitani (00:54:49):

Well, for a field primatologist, you just have to, I think, have a fascination with the creatures that... It takes a long time to discover anything about them. It's just because they live their lives like us. They grow up very slowly. They reproduce very late in life, and they live a really, really long time. So it takes dedication, and years and years of just going out there to discover anything about them. But things pay off from time to time. But I think it's dedication. For years, my students would always complain to me that the field work was

tough because as you've been to Kibale, and it is fairly hilly, there's a lot of up and down. But that complaint never registered with me. It only registered to me in my older age. And what I realized why the complaint never registered to me when I was younger, and I could more easily do the field work because the field work was fun and that just dominated everything. This was exciting. It was fun. It didn't put too much strain on me physically. But now that I've aged, and I wake up with aches and pains that weren't there 10, 20, 20 years ago, I can understand the complaint. It's not as fun anymore.

Bernard Wood (00:56:23):

Okay. So let's go back to normal life. You were a postdoc. What was your job after your postdoc at Rockefeller? How were you putting, were you just responsible for yourself or did you have a family or how were you sort of merging the life in the forest and the fascination with the chimps to the fact that you were a human being and you had to earn a living?

John Mitani (00:57:04):

I did this extended postdoc at Rockefeller for about five or six years, and I was single. It was very hard to develop any kind of relationships given the way I was leading my life as a field worker. And I think I spent six of my first 12 years of life in the business, in the field. There was a time, I have this vague recollection, there was a time early on that I thought.... I was seeing my friends settle down, beginning families of their own. And I was starting to wonder, well do I, do I really want to give this up to maybe act like a more normal person? And I obviously made my choice. I was very lucky to meet somebody later in life who I've had along and very happy marriage with, but that came much later. I actually.... toward the end of his career, Peter Marler decided he didn't want to live the last years of his life in snowy upstate New York. So he actually moved back to California to the University of California Davis where I did my graduate work. I moved back with Peter for one year to Davis. I was working (on it as) in a research capacity. I was mostly in the field that year, and it was the very next year that I got my first and only tenure track job at the University of Michigan where I spent the next 30 years before retiring in 2020.

Bernard Wood (00:58:44):

And how did that come about? That was a job that they were advertising. They were looking for a chimp person.

John Mitani (00:58:52):

Oh boy, that's a story. You want to hear this one?

Bernard Wood (00:58:56):

I want to hear all these stories.

John Mitani (00:58:59):

Well, I had this extended postdoc. I was living entirely on grants and soft money. I was early on during my postdoctoral career, I thought that like everybody else, it would be nice to have a real job, a real faculty position. And I was searching for faculty positions and was coming up empty. Very few, if any, nibbles (while) during those early years.

Bernard Wood (00:59:28):

But you were applying for jobs, but you weren't successful?

Not at all. At that same time, I was being told by some of my respected colleagues and friends like Richard Wrangham and Robert Seyfarth that, "John, you don't want a job like us." You want to keep this postdoc gig going as long as you can, if you can. And during that transition to Davis, I went back to Davis in my fifth or sixth year. I bought into that idea. I had multiple grants.

(01:00:10):

I was set for the next three or four years moving.... I was making a transition to the study chimps at the time. So everything was great. I got home from Indonesia, went to New York to collect my goods because Peter and his lab had already transferred to Davis while I was in Indonesia and I tootled across the country. I stopped in Wisconsin to visit Karen Strier, who was a friend. Karen told me that Barb Smuts, another friend and colleague, Barbara Smuts was in town visiting her then partner at Wisconsin. Karen urged me to go over and talk to Barb, which I was happy to do. I had a nice conversation with Barb. I was about to leave, I think I was halfway out the door and Barb looked at me and said, we have a job at Michigan. Because Richard Wrangham, had just left for Harvard. And she said, you should apply.

(01:01:24):

I said to her, well, I'm not sure how that's going to happen, because it was in September. This meeting was in September or so. And I was planning to go to Mahale for the very first time in November or December, and I told Barb, well, wait, you're not going to bring me.... And I was going to be in Mahale for the next six months or so. And I told Barb, how's this going to work? You're not going to fly me back from Africa for an interview if I am shortlisted. And she just looked at me and said, apply. I got back to Davis. I talked to Peter Marler about this, and Peter said, well, hell apply, what's it going to cost you? It's going to cost you the cost of a postage stamp in this pre-internet age. So I did send in an application. A few weeks later, they asked me to come out to interview before they even (en)closed on the position.

(01:02:25):

I went off to Africa to Mahale, put it out of my mind. And I got a telex. You remember these? Not a telegram, a telex, carefully constructed and how many 200 characters? So that things can fit from Michigan saying we'd like to offer you the job. So I stayed in camp that morning, carefully constructed, constructing my 200 character response. Sent it off, and it never got to Michigan. But they knew how I was corresponding with Barb on the side that I liked it. But things worked out. But again, another accident in my career that this fortuitous happenstance meeting with Barb as I was just driving across country....

Bernard Wood (01:03:27):

And her background, she was working. She wasn't working on great apes.

John Mitani (01:03:36):

Barb actually tried to start her career studying the Gombe chimps, but this was in the mid seventies and at the precise time when a few students were kidnapped from Gombe shutting down research operations. In fact, she was one of the students who was kidnapped. She says she was sick that day and in camp, and that's the reason why she was taken. But she was released quite early. And the story she tells, she was released quite early because her kidnappers were fearing that she would die on them because she was so sick. So she went out and carried out the ransom note that the kidnappers wanted conveyed to people. But because of that, research at Gombe was shut down for several years, and she went off and did a very important study on baboons like I intended to do all those years ago.

Bernard Wood (01:04:47):

So your time at Michigan, I mean you were obviously somebody who was willing to contribute their time to the running of the department and the university. What was your memory of three decades of working in that department and in that university? Just give us a sense of who was in the department when you joined.

John Mitani (01:05:22):

Well, it changed quite a bit over the years. When I started, Barb had a part-time position in anthropology and psychology. Kim Hill, a very well-known human behavioral ecologist, was a young faculty member at Michigan. And then there was this collection of other individuals who, many of whom are very well known in the field: Milford Wolpoff, Loring Brace, Roberto Frisancho. Stanley Garn was around although he didn't have a position in department. Frank Livingston. So there was quite an age gap in membership in the biological anthropology group. So for years - Kim left. Barb moved entirely over to psychology. And for years, I was there with a lot of these older members in the field.

(01:06:36):

But over time, people retire. And I think one of the things I'm very happy, if not proud about, is how we've been able to develop a really vibrant group of biological anthropologists at Michigan. We hired Laura Maclatchy, one of your paleoanthropological colleagues early on, Jacinta Beehner, another student of primates studied geladas and capuchin monkeys. Jacinta brought her husband Thore Bergman, who's a good friend and colleague who has his position in psychology. Andy Marshall, a good friend and colleague, primate conservationist who does work in Indonesia, has been hired and is now part of the group for a while. Abby Bigham, a geneticist, was with us. She's moved over to UCLA recently. And we also hired during my time Maureen Devlin, a skeletal biologist.

Bernard Wood (01:07:50):

She was a graduate student here.

John Mitani (01:07:52):

Oh yeah, she was a graduate student with Dan Lieberman briefly there before moving back to Harvard. And Dan moved back to Harvard. And since I've left, they've hired Tina Lasisi, who is going to be a big mover and shaker in the field. So I think things have changed quite

considerably during those 30 years I was at Michigan in the biological anthropology group. And....

Bernard Wood (01:08:25):

So the impression I get is that the amount of research that you did before you accepted a job was not really as profound as the amount of research that you do on the chimps. In other words, you didn't look at departments in the states and go through them and decide, well, I don't want to go to this one, but maybe this is a better department. It was entirely the fact that to Barbara Smuts was visiting Karen Strier and that was your link to Michigan.

John Mitani (01:09:01):

And again, I was having a hard time finding a faculty position. I couldn't find a faculty position. It (was) kind of just fell into my lap. And I thought, this is a good school. I had some good colleagues like Barb, but like Kim, others, people who you may or may not know. Dick Alexander an entomologist, who was really, to my mind, one of the founding fathers in the study of sociobiology as well, along with Ed Wilson and others. Warren Holmes, a comparative psychologist, student of ground squirrels, did a lot of ground breaking research on how ground squirrels and other organisms recognize their kin. A lot of good colleagues, Philip Gingerich and Holly Smith.

(01:10:02):

So I found a lot of comfort and solace outside of the department. Michigan is a big place. They're tons of research going on and a lot of good friends and colleagues scattered throughout the university. There's so many people, I can't even remember a name. People that I still am friends with today, Catherine Badgley, who you'll know, still stay in contact with. I was just incredibly lucky to end up there. When I got up there, got there being a Californian.... If you were to ask me 30 years ago or so, 35 years or so. So in 1990 when I first arrived at Michigan, (if you asked) if I would still be there now, I would have looked at you and thought you were from another planet. But I never envisioned us staying there for the rest of my life. But I met my wife there too, so that was another bonus.

Bernard Wood (01:11:02):

So what was the role of teaching in your life?

John Mitani (01:11:09):

Okay, I'll be entirely honest here. I didn't like it at first. I spent very little, if any, time as a graduate student teaching or serving as a teaching assistant. I think only one time that I can remember. I had this research career during this extended postdoc, five, six years, no teaching responsibility at all. So when I got to Michigan, teaching was an entirely new experience. And if I am honest, I will have to admit that I didn't really like it, that this was just taking time away from my research. And at the time I was just beginning my studies at chimps and trying to ramp up that work, which was time consuming obviously. But over time, I think, or quite quickly, I realized teaching was rewarding. I liked interacting with students, and I realized that in order to teach and teach well, you had to know the subject matter in a way that was beyond my grasp at the time.

(01:12:33):

I thought I knew stuff. I did. You really have to understand the material in an entirely different way to teach and to teach effectively. I'll never forget one of my first days in class. They gave me a big primate behavior class to teach initially, a couple hundred students. And there's no more sobering experience than staring out into (a sea of) 200 uncomprehending faces. I thought I had this down. I thought this is all clear and comprehensible, but it was instantly obvious looking out into that sea of faces of what's going on, knowing that I'm not doing this, I'm not doing it right. And that was actually a challenge. I took that as a challenge.

Bernard Wood (01:13:32):

And you've obviously got, I mean, you obviously surmounted the challenge, but do you think that was the result of hard work or hard work and talent or,

John Mitani (01:13:47):

I don't think of myself as

Bernard Wood (01:13:49):

Hardworking talent.

John Mitani (01:13:51):

I don't think as myself as naturally talented in any of these realms. I think it's just hard work. It was hard work. You put in the time. Just learn what works, what doesn't work. Go to talks. I was just talking to a young colleague the other day who was asking me about teaching advice. And I told him one of the things I learned early on.... we were just at professional meetings, and I learned at professional meetings you could learn both from good talks - what works - and bad ones - what doesn't work - so what not to do as well as what to do.

Bernard Wood (01:14:37):

Sure. When I was training to be a surgeon, somebody very wise said, you need to go and watch somebody who's not so good.

John Mitani (01:14:50):

That's dangerous.

Bernard Wood (01:14:52):

Well, perjury. But the fact is that there is a bell shaped curve of surgical competence just as there is for anything else. So if you were deprived of what you had done, what would've been the other thing that you might've spent the rest of your life doing?

John Mitani (01:15:18):

That's a really good question, and I'm not sure I have an answer to that. I think this idea of me being lucky, serendipity, rearing its head here and there, and just giving me opportunities to do things along the way is a constant theme or thing that I constantly think about when I look back on what I've done. And I just feel so lucky. I'm very fond of

something - of saying something that's absolutely true, and that's, "I've been to places and seen and done things that most people can only dream about." And having lived that dream, it's hard for me to think of living my life any other way. The way

Bernard Wood (01:16:14):

Is your experience and the luck and the opportunities is that what motivates your work with the Leakey foundation?

John Mitani (01:16:26):

I think early on. I think this is largely the influence of Peter Marler - being that poor boy from Britain who wasn't given maybe the opportunities he should have been given back in his home country. He always impressed upon us as postdocs and as graduate students that, again, here's this word again, lucky - or we belong to this small exclusive group who have been given these amazing opportunities to go off and pursue these studies of these esoteric topics. And given that, we need to be cognizant of the fact that this is a small and exclusive group, and what you have to do is - you have to pay back in any and all ways to make sure that the study, whatever you're involved in, continues and thrives. So I was asked to serve on the Scientific Executive Committee of the Leakey Foundation several years ago. And that was a no brainer for me (that) the Leakey Foundation was integral in helping jumpstart my career. I had a grant as a graduate student to do my thesis research, had another subsequent grant to fund my postdoctoral research. Got a few more grants along the way as a postdoc and as a pre-tenure faculty member. So I've always felt I've owed the Leakey Foundation so much.

(01:18:14):

And again, small way to give back.

Bernard Wood (01:18:19):

And can we talk a little about the way that we communicate our ideas and our research to other people in the form of publications? Do you have any publications that if you were forced to go on a desert island, which of the ones that you would take with you, or rather, which are the ones that you would select as exemplifying your contribution?

John Mitani (01:18:55):

Oh, that's probably an easy one because a few years ago I was asked to give a talk at the annual meetings of the American Society of Primatologists. And I used that as an opportunity just to review my career. They asked me after that talk to turn it into a paper. And I did so. It was published a few years ago, 2021. It's called My Life Among the Apes. So it does, more or less, a good job of reviewing many of the things we've talked about here, I think, and my career studying gibbons and orangutans and chimps as well.

Bernard Wood (01:19:41):

And you studied gibbons and oranges and chimps. They all live in forests, but the forests are very different. The animals are different. Do you think there is more in common with the study of those than the factors that make them separate?

John Mitani (01:20:07):

I'm not sure I understand that question.

Bernard Wood (01:20:12):

You go and look at gibbons, you look at orangs and you spent many years looking at chimps. They're all primates. They're all relatively closely related to us. Although gibbons are highly specialized morphologically, do you have any sense of the way the differences among those three groups of primates really affects how you go about observing them?

John Mitani (01:20:56):

I'm not so sure. Maybe, are you getting at the fact that here we have this collection, small collection of our closest living relatives. Now they all are forest dwelling creatures, yet they're all doing quite different things. Gibbons are socially monogamous. Orangutans, for the most part, move about by themselves. They come together obviously to mate. Gorillas live in fairly small, stable social groups, typically a single male, multiple females, their kids - social polygny as we'd call it. Really the predominant form of mammalian social system if animals are grouping. And then you have this weird thing that chimps and bonobos are doing. We recognize a community or social group of bonobos and chimps, but it's rarely, if ever, that you'll find everybody in those social groups together at a single place at a single time. They come together and they split apart. Like we as humans. They come and go - despite the fact that we recognize this community that's living within a bounded territory, all group members being hostile to neighbors in the case of chimps. And up until recently - for bonobos (groups) moving by themselves for the most part, although there's some recent studies that are now showing that different groups, if you're in different groups of bonobos, that members sometimes hang out for days on end. Something that's only been revealed fairly recently despite years of study of these animals. If you are asking, okay, here we have our closest living relatives living in forest environments and they're all doing, why are they doing all these different things? I think it's largely food related.

(01:23:01):

The forests of Southeast Asia where gibbons and orangutans live, they're not very productive. They're scraping and scrimping to find foods limiting the group sizes of those animals. Gibbons are highly territorial and they're behaving in a territorial fashion, to defend off others from their food supplies. Gorillas, being as large as they are, can make a living feeding on vegetation, which is for the most part is easier to find than the sugar rich fruits that Bonobos and chimps live on. So this permits the gorillas to move about together in relatively small groups. But then when you come to gibbons, I'm sorry, bonobos and chimps, I think feeding competition enters the equation again. Sometimes there's a lot of fruit, in which case you'll get these large collections or parties as we call them, of chimps and bonobos moving together. But when food is scarce, the levels of feeding competition escalate. And for both chimps and to a certain extent, bonobos, that's when you find them splitting apart and just going off their separate ways to reduce those levels of feeding competition.

Bernard Wood (01:24:27):

Okay, but let me ask you the question in a slightly more intelligent way than I did. It strikes me that these days, just as there is in paleoanthropology, there is a lot of specialization. It's perfectly possible to do your PhD looking at chimps to do a postdoc looking at chimps, and

then to spend the rest of your career looking at chimps. Do you think your experience by having the prior experience with the gibbons and the oranges somehow affected the way that you went about looking at chimps?

John Mitani (01:25:16):

The revelation when I moved to the study of chimps was a realization that I never studied a social primate in my life. Gibbons are by themselves. There's not much to do with anybody. And the orangutans were by themselves, and boring is all hell. You have never sat underneath the sleeping orangutan 40 meters above you for six hours at a time. That gets a little tedious. I took up smoking. I would smoke a cigarette during those times just to keep me awake. This is one of the reasons I left the study of orangutans. I was literally getting a bit bored.

Bernard Wood (01:26:04):

And also it was a health risk. If it was driving you to smoke,

John Mitani (01:26:08):

Well, I would strictly limit myself to one cigarette a day. It was only when the orangutans were way above me. So I don't think they inhaled anything. I hope that didn't inhale anything.

Bernard Wood (01:26:21):

I mean, what I'm trying to say is that one of the things I admire about you is your eclectic knowledge of all of these primates. And that seems to me something quite special. But I may be wrong, but I don't think I'm wrong. I mean, I think that's one of the

John Mitani (01:26:48):

I think....

Bernard Wood (01:26:49):

(reasons you've had) such an impact.

John Mitani (01:26:50):

I see what you're saying now. I think, yeah, I bring something, maybe special to bear on the fact that I have done all these things. I've always considered myself though a jack of all trade and (some) master at none. But yeah, I was talking earlier about that great ape conference where everybody was coming together. And the big topic of discussion, having said what you've said, where everybody's siloed into their own study site, just going there all the time, just watching what my chimps at Tai or my chimps at Kanyawara or my chimps at Gombe do without trying to expand your horizons. The thing that everybody was talking about there was that it might repay the effort if we got out and sort of made site visits to each other's sites. And it is an eyeopening experience because I'm sure that, I know that one of the things we've learned about the behavior of our closest living relatives like us, that they're not static. They're not unitary in what they do, and there's quite a bit of variability and a central challenge in the study of primate behavior is trying to figure out what's causing all that variability.

Bernard Wood (01:28:19):

So we should be wrapping up, and I wonder whether there are any topics that you would like to cover that we haven't covered?

John Mitani (01:28:29):

No. Again. I think this thing. I'm older now. I'm retired, I have time on my hands. I think back on what I've done. And the one thing that I always think about is how amazingly lucky I've been. I've had great mentors. I've had a lot of support. These days in science it's hard to work isolated in a silo, and I've always been blessed to have this wonderful group of mentors. People like Peter Rodman, Peter Marler, Toshi, Tom Struhsaker there to help me along. I've had a wonderful group of students to work with and colleagues like David Watts. Richard Wrangham has always been tremendously supportive of our work. Just stepped into things I think at the right time. So if there's anything I'd really want to convey here today is the gratitude I have for this wonderful life I've been able to lead.

Bernard Wood (01:29:47):

And what advice would you give to somebody who is wanting to be a chimpologist or a primate behavior person?

John Mitani (01:30:02):

Okay, maybe here is one thing that I haven't mentioned. I started my career doing these field experiments. I was operating at a time when maybe primate behavior was trying to become a respectable scientific endeavor where we were taught to use the hypothetico-deductive framework where you take current theory, build hypotheses based on that theory, then go out and test those hypotheses in as rigorous away as you could. So that was the way I grew up in the early days, and I really changed mid-stride. I kind of maybe went backwards. I morphed from an experimentalist into being more or less a natural historian. And when I made the switch to chimpanzees, I actively made a conscious choice to maybe just sit back and spend time with these animals and let them tell me their stories. So I think one of the things that people are getting away from these days is maybe not spending as much time as they can with their animals because it really is an eyeopening experience - watching, observing chimpanzees. Like I said, it takes a long time for them to give up the secrets of their lives to us as human observers because they live so long. But spending that time, I think is more than well worth the effort. It will repay the effort. There's nothing better than watching these animals, and they're going to constantly surprise, if not delight along the way. So spend time with your animals. Watch them. Watch them closely.

(01:32:13):

I guess the paleoanthropological equivalent of that would be get out in the field and find some fossils.

Bernard Wood (01:32:22):

Well, I'm not sure. I think a paleoanthropological equivalent of that will be to spend quite a lot of time in museum collections and look and see what a collection of chimps looks like. Look and see what a collection of oranges look like.

John Mitani (01:32:43):

You are the paleoanthropologist, so I will defer to you on that one.

Bernard Wood (01:32:48):

I agree that one has to go out and find fossils, but I think the equivalent of just spending time with the chimps because they're trying to give a message to you. I mean, when I trained as a surgeon, a very wise person said, look, the patients are trying to tell you what's wrong with them. Your job is to listen and not to get in the way of them doing that.

John Mitani (01:33:19):

I don't want to extend this longer than you want to, but since you asked, and now that I'm thinking about it, there is one more thing I think I'd really want to say here. Because one of the things I really fear these days is that all these wonderful opportunities that I've been given over the years to go here, there everywhere in different parts of Africa and Asia, to be with our closest living relatives, all the apes, and this includes gibbons, orangutans, bonobos, chimps, as well as gorillas, is that - they might not be here much longer. And that's because the world is a very different place than from when I started 50 or so years ago. Massive habitat destruction, a thriving wild meat trade in different parts of Africa, and recurrent outbreaks of infectious disease, are just decimating populations of apes across their geographic range. So one of the things I really want to do in the time that I have left here is to work more on conservation issues and problems to make sure that these remarkable animals will be here in the future.

Bernard Wood (01:34:38):

Well, John, thank you very much for your time, and I'm a great admirer of yours, and it's been a pleasure to talk to you. And yeah, many thanks.

John Mitani (01:34:51):

Well, no, thank you for giving me this opportunity. It's always lovely to talk to you, and this has been a quite wide ranging discussion.

Bernard Wood (01:35:03):

Okay, thanks John.

John Mitani (01:35:06):

Thank you. And thank you, Alexis.