

For a long time there has been heated discussion in scientific circles as to whether any primates in the wild ever modify natural objects to make tools. My chimpanzees have settled the argument once and for all: The answer is that at least some chimpanzees do.

Termites form a major part of the chimpanzee diet for a two-month period. The termite season starts at the beginning of the rains, when the fertile insects grow wings and are ready to leave the nest. At this time the passages are extended to the surface of the termite heap and then sealed lightly over while the insects await good flying weather. The chimpanzee is not alone in his taste for termites -- the baboon in particular has a fondness for the juicy insects, but he must wait until they fly and then take his turn, together with the birds, at grabbing the termites as they leave the nest.

The chimpanzee forestalls them all. He comes along, peers at the surface of the termite heap and, where he spies one of the sealed-off entrances, scrapes away the thin layer of soil. Then he picks a straw or dried stem of grass and pokes this carefully down the hole. The termites, like miniature bulldogs, bite the straw and hang on grimly as it is gently withdrawn.

I have watched chimpanzees fish this way for two hours at a time, picking dainty morsels from the straw and munching them with delight. When they don't have much luck with one hole, they open another and try again.

As the straw becomes bent at the end, the chimpanzee breaks off the bent pieces until the tool is too short for further use. Then it is discarded and a new one picked. Sometimes a leafy twig is selected, and before this can be used the chimpanzee has to strip off the leaves.

In so doing -- in modifying a natural object to make it suitable for a specific purpose -- the chimpanzee has reached the first crude beginnings of tool making.

In this respect, the chimpanzees do not always await the discovery of a termite nest before seeking a tool. I have seen them break off a twig and carry it for as far as half a mile, going from one termite hill to another, though none at the time was suitable for feeding.

-- Jane Goodall, "My Life Among Wild Chimpanzees," in *National Geographic* August 1963, pp.307-308.