



© AL SETKA, GREAT APE TRUST OF IOWA

CONSERVATION IN THE CONGO

THE ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF
MILWAUKEE TRAVELS TO THE HEART OF
THE CONGO TO SAVE THE BONOBO

By Gay Edwards Reinartz, PhD, and Stefanie McLaughlin

Nearly 8,000 miles from Milwaukee, Wis., deep in the rainforest of the Salonga National Park, my Congolese research assistants and park guards, Mboyo Bolinga, Edmond, and Nduzo, and I strain to watch as the treetops shake with the leaps and excited calls of a family of bonobos. Upon sighting these rare apes, we creep along in the dense underbrush, trying not to make a sound, but my feet seem to snap every twig and get tangled in the thorny vines. The men whisper excitedly as we try to catch a glimpse of the dozen or so bonobos high in the canopy. Suddenly, an adult male appears. He stops and squeals as he spots us below. With uncommon boldness, he swiftly knocks off a large dead branch from the tree 20 meters above us. Pow! The guards push me out of the way and scatter to avoid being hit. The heavy branch thuds to the ground landing within inches of us. The large male calls out in sharp agitated hoots. The bonobo group immediately splits up screaming. Some drop from the trees, and others take an arboreal route to move deeper into the forest. Awed by the encounter and our good luck, we quickly check under the trees for fecal (genetic) samples and take notes on the forest characteristics and the bonobos' behavior.

Six years ago, an event such as this was rare, even for the research assistants who reside at Etate, the Zoological Society of Milwaukee (ZSM) research station in the northern sector of the Salonga National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo). Historically this area suffered heavy poaching – for forest elephants and other large mammals, including bonobos. Today, bonobo sightings are more common in large part because of a successful anti-poaching and bonobo-monitoring program, the Bonobo and Congo Biodiversity Initiative (BCBI). This initiative, a partnership between the ZSM and the Institut pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN), the government agency responsible for federally protected areas in the Congo, began in 1997 to determine whether the Salonga National Park harbored a significant population of bonobos and whether the park was an important conservation site for this species. Nearly a decade later, ZSM and ICCN are still committed to conserving and protecting Salonga's bonobos. The BCBI originated as a study of bonobo distribution and abundance in the Salonga and has evolved to meld research with park support, anti-poaching, and community outreach.

The bonobo (*Pan paniscus*) is one of the least known of the great apes. Like their chimpanzee cousins, bonobos share over 98 percent of their genetic makeup with humans, but unlike the chimpanzee, bonobos are found only in remote rainforest areas south of the Congo River in the country formerly known as Zaire and now the Democratic Republic of Congo. Victims of habitat destruction, poaching and the deadly effects of a 4-year long civil war, bonobos are among the most threatened great apes. How many bonobos still survive in the rainforests of Congo is virtually unknown. Consequently, the most urgent conservation need is to determine where major wild bonobo populations occur and to protect them. Knowledge about bonobos in the Salonga National Park, the species' only federally protected area, is critical to the development of a nationwide conservation strategy.

In 1996, out of concern for this vanishing rare ape, the Bonobo Species Survival Plan[®] (Bonobo SSP), headed by the ZSM, resolved to support *in-situ* conservation. One year earlier, the *Action Plan for Pan paniscus* had identified major zones for population surveys, and the Salonga was listed as a priority survey site. Past records indicated that bonobos did not occur in the Salonga, but there had been no research to confirm this. Following *Action Plan* recommendations, the Bonobo SSP voted to adopt the Salonga survey as its *in-situ* project. As Species Coordinator of the Bonobo SSP, I scouted out possibilities to support fieldwork in Congo and to collaborate with field scientists on location. As it turned out, there were none working in Salonga during that period, few western scientists had ever visited the park, and so we had to start from scratch.

The Salonga, largely unknown except for historical elephant hunts, had too long been neglected by the international conservation community. The park lacked an effective guard force and infrastructure. Logistics were a primary problem: there were no usable roads; what roads had once existed during colonial times were merely footpaths. Airstrips at the time were non-existent. Travel was by foot or dugout canoe. This vast World Heritage Site, an area that spans 36,000 km², had the potential to be the largest, relatively undisturbed protected bonobo habitat. To garner financial and logistical support, we needed proof that the bonobo resided in Salonga and that a survey was feasible and worthwhile. Two worthy scientists, Ellen Van Krunkelsven and Inogwabini Bila Isia, joined ZSM and in December 1997 led the first exploratory mission to Salonga – a rugged 20-day journey that laid the groundwork for BCBI. I recall a tearfully joyous report from Ellen upon her return: "Gay, we found bonobo nests everywhere we went!" We now had the direct evidence needed to request funding for a larger survey effort. Tragically, however, seven months after this landmark discovery, civil war broke out in Congo, effectively halting all conservation efforts. The war killed three million people, and became known as Africa's First World War. Congo, already one of the world's poorest countries, would sink deeper into poverty and an unprecedented humanitarian crisis.

Despite the ongoing war and risks, a brave team of ZSM and ICCN Congolese field staff, led by Inogwabini, traveled to the Salonga in 2000 to provide emergency aid and equipment to the isolated park guards. In 2001, before the war's end, I obtained special government approval to accompany Inogwabini to Salonga so that we could implement a United Nations Foundation & UNESCO grant to pay salary supplements to the Salonga park guards – encouragement to protect the park in the face of ever-growing dangers from the war. On that journey by river, carrying over \$10,000 in salaries, we traveled 800 km by dugout and passed through 17 military check-points to arrive to a hero's welcome by the park guards and local communities. The UNESCO project gave us the avenue to assess the park's capacity, interact with the local community, and begin to formulate ideas for conservation.

From then on, we conducted site surveys across Salonga's forests to determine bonobo distribution and to gather ecological data on how different forest types influenced bonobo density. Salonga's bonobo population appeared boundless but the species' distribution was patchy, either because of changing habitat characteristics or poaching or both. We found evidence of extensive

CONTINUED, PAGE 10

poaching (snares, shotgun shells, campsites and foot paths cut deep in the forests) and areas that were completely devoid of bonobos and most other large mammals. The level of poaching was no surprise. The guards lacked shoes and uniforms, field equipment, transportation, communication equipment, guns, ammunition, and training to combat the well-armed poachers (often supported by military). It became clear that we needed to help ICCN protect the bonobo sites that we were discovering. Considering ICCN's scant resources, we had to provide finances, materials and technical support if the bonobos of Salonga were to thrive.

Over the past nine years, BCBI has evolved into a multi-disciplinary program that integrates bonobo population assessment and monitoring, park support and capacity building for ICCN, training, and community outreach. Accomplishments include:

BONOBO RESEARCH AND MONITORING: By converting a poaching camp on the Salonga River, ZSM established a research station and model patrol post staffed by guards with special training in bonobo monitoring and data collection. Since 2000, we have surveyed 13 sites throughout the park, elucidating bonobo distribution patterns and how forest types affect bonobo density. Research activities led to the disclosure of poaching patterns, and we used this information to direct anti-poaching activities. Five sites surveyed by ZSM are now protected by ZSM's anti-poaching efforts.

PARK SUPPORT, ANTI-POACHING, AND CAPACITY BUILDING: ZSM also supports 21 supplementary guards that patrol the bonobo-rich areas. Using four dugouts, two outboard motors and fuel supplies donated by ZSM, the park guards in the northern sector of Salonga have formed mobile patrols to effectively track down poachers. In 2004, ZSM supported the first paramilitary training for the Salonga National Park guards.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH: Many schools in the villages around Salonga are defunct due to the inability of the villages to pay school fees. Furthermore, villagers lack commercial goods (other than bushmeat) and access to markets. To help reduce local poaching in the park, ZSM and ICCN are helping to rebuild schools, employ villagers, and with a grant from the U.S. Embassy, develop an agricultural cooperative that will revitalize agriculture in 6 villages along the Salonga River.

Since BCBI's inception, other international organizations have joined the effort to bring the Salonga National Park up to functioning standards. Today, as a member of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (USAID forest conservation program), ZSM collaborates with the World Wildlife Fund – United States, World Wildlife Fund – International, and the Wildlife Conservation Society to conserve the park and the Salonga landscape. BCBI remains the premier bonobo conservation program within this consortium.

In the future, ZSM will continue to further study the ecological and human factors affecting bonobo presence/density. We will continue the help strengthen ICCN. However, the largest conservation impact will come from the people associated with our project as they gain education, expertise, and possibly a better way of life. They are the ones who have ancestral roots in Salonga, and

ultimately they have the most to say about the future of bonobos and Salonga.

If you would like additional information or to help our efforts, please contact the Conservation Department, Zoological Society of Milwaukee, 1421 N. Water Street, Milwaukee, WI 53202; (414) 276-0339 <http://www.zoosociety.org/Conservation/Bonobo/>.

GAY EDWARDS REINARTZ, PHD, IS THE DIRECTOR, BONOBO AND CONGO BIODIVERSITY INITIATIVE AND SPECIES COORDINATOR, BONOBO SPECIES SURVIVAL PLAN AT THE ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

STEFANIE MCLAUGHLIN IS ASSISTANT CONSERVATION COORDINATOR AT THE ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

