

In partnership with the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Tourism

EKOLO YA BONOBO: Reintroduction of bonobos in the DRC

The release: A matter of urgency

The next ten years will mark a critical turning point for the future of bonobos. As the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is emerging from a decade of civil war, the bonobo population has been decimated by hunting, the bush-meat trade and loss of its natural habitat due to an ever increasing human population and the uncontrolled exploitation of the forest. As is the case for other mammalian species at risk of extinction, the strategic reintroduction of sanctuary-rehabilitated bonobos may represent a vital tool in the stabilisation of remaining wild populations by increasing their genetic diversity or by repopulating zones from which wild bonobos may have disappeared. In order to be sustainable however, reintroductions must be part of an integrated species conservation program which also addresses the main factors which put the species at risk.



ABC: An integrated approach to the protection of the bonobo

Rescue and rehabilitation. The very existence of LOLA YA BONOBO sanctuary which takes in bonobo orphans, victims of the bush-meat trade, enables the relevant authorities to enforce existing laws on the possession and trade in endangered species, an essential step to contain this illicit trade. Since 1994, ABC's Sanctuary has rescued over 80 orphan bonobos, with an average yearly survival rate of 95%.

Education. The sanctuary enables the education of local youths – tomorrow's decision-makers and potential consumers of bush-meat – as well as civil servants responsible for the effective enforcement of the laws on the possession and trade in endangered species. ABC's educational program reaches over 35 000 people a year, mostly through visits to the sanctuary.

Reintroduction. Socially stable groups of bonobos, rehabilitated at the Sanctuary, are released into an appropriate environment of the DRC. This 3rd objective became reality in June of 2009.

The release: Systematic and meticulous preparation

ABC's reintroduction program is carried out in accordance with IUCN Guidelines; taking into account results of previous Great Ape reintroductions and recommendations from relevant international seminars; with the support of international experts and in collaboration with national experts from the Environment Ministry and ICCN (Congolese Institute for the Conservation of Nature).

Veterinarian preparation - The selection of the bonobos that are suitable for reintroduction is based on medical examinations and systematic medical monitoring as well as behavioural observations. Prior to the reintroduction, all selected bonobos are held in quarantine for several months, are vaccinated against Tetanus and Polio, undergo a full medical exam and must test negative for tuberculosis, hepatitis B, SIV and monkey pox (among others). These examinations are carried out in collaboration with the Max-Planck Institute (MPI-EVA, Germany) and the National Institute for Biomedical Research in Kinshasa, among others.

The genotyping of the sanctuary's bonobos was carried out by a geneticist from MPI-EVA. The genotypic identification of each of the reintroduced bonobos will allow paternity tests for future births. It is also a unique contribution to our knowledge of the species.

Site selection – The site for the reintroduction was selected based on strict criteria: biophysical characteristics specific to the bonobos' natural habitat, sanitary, socioeconomic, legal and logistical criteria, and first and foremost, criteria relative to the attitude of neighbouring human communities.

EKOLO YA BONOBO is located in a forest block belonging to the Pôo Community, within the *Maringa-Lopori-Wamba Landscape*, near Basankusu (Province of Equateur). The ecological characteristics of the site are ideal: a swampy rainforest of approximately 50.000 acres, previously inhabited by wild bonobos, where over fifty plant species from the bonobos' diet can be found. Access by humans is limited as the forest floor is submerged for several months a year. Mostly used for eel fishing and for gathering fire-wood, the forest of EKOLO did not represent an essential socioeconomic asset for the Pôo population.



In August of 2008 an agreement was signed with the representatives of the Pôo community and the relevant administrative authorities, allowing ABC to use the EKOLO YA BONOBO site and committing to protect the released bonobos. In December 2008, the DRC Environment Ministry gave its endorsement for the gazetting of the forest as a “Special Reserve or Centre for the re-adaptation of bonobos to life in the wild”.

The release... and all the rest: An integrated conservation program

In June 2009, a first group of bonobos rehabilitated at the Sanctuary was released at EKOLO YA BONOBO. This was carried out in close collaboration with the local population and relevant authorities. In order to guarantee the security of the released bonobos and to ensure that the reintroduction program contributed to its main objective - the conservation of bonobos *in situ* - the reintroduction program includes the following elements:

- ✦ Post-release monitoring, to ensure the good health and well-being of the released individuals and to document program results;
- ✦ Awareness-raising in local communities on the bonobo and its conservation;
- ✦ Anti-poaching patrols, to help enforce existing conservation laws and community commitments for the protection of bonobos and their habitat;
- ✦ Socioeconomic micro-projects to secure direct benefits to communities neighbouring the reserve.

Post-release monitoring - Lacking a method for telemetric tracking that is both reliable and safe for the bonobos, the post-release monitoring is carried out through direct observation. Two teams of trackers alternate and follow the bonobos from nest to nest. The trackers record the GPS coordinates of the nests, the distances covered, plant species eaten and certain elements of group dynamics. These techniques have been used for decades by the Japanese scientific teams in the Luo Reserve at Wamba.

Education and awareness-raising - At the end of 2007, educational activities were initiated to raise awareness of the bonobo, the dangers of the bush-meat trade and the importance of the reintroduction. These activities targeted most specifically the villages bordering the reserve, schools and local authorities. A larger audience was reached through various radio broadcasts and the sponsoring of the local football team “The Basankusu Bonobos”. Since the reintroduction, the released bonobos themselves have become the best ambassadors for the protection of their species. Every evening, tens of dug-out canoes stop as the passengers observe the bonobos in the canopy and listen to the explanations delivered by our staff. To maintain the tremendous educational impact of the direct observation of the bonobos once the group will have ventured further inland, ABC is planning to create a sanctuary on the island of Totaka, a small floodable island on the Lopori River, not far from EKOLO.



The patrols - Based on the agreement signed between ABC and the Pôo community, eco-guards scour the reserve to find and report any evidence of human activity (camps, fields, hunting, fishing, gathering of fire-wood). The main objective is to eliminate any risks for the bonobos (e.g. snares/traps) and to minimise the risks of encounters between the bonobos and humans. The eco-guards discourage villagers from using the forest and keep them informed of the whereabouts of the bonobos.

Community development – One of ABC’s commitments to the Pôo community was that the reintroduction program would directly benefit the local population in the short and the long run, a major factor contributing to the security of the bonobos and the sustainability of the project. In the



long run, the indirect benefits of the project’s presence as well as its ecotourism potential will contribute to the socioeconomic development of the area. In the meantime, ABC turned to individuals and institutional partners for funding to support the local population’s top priorities: text books and blackboards for the local schools; essential equipment for the delivery rooms at local clinics; start-up stocks for community pharmacies; fishing and agriculture tools and materials in support of the Village Development Committees.

2009-2010: Preliminary results

In line with IUCN’s philosophy, the aim of a release is that the reintroduced primates readapt to life in the wild and reproduce in a sustainable manner.

Eighteen months after the release, the first results are very promising:

- From the first few days, the bonobos began building night nests high in the trees.
- The bonobos forage and feed with success, eating over 50 plant species found at EKOLO. They are healthy and even seem to have gained weight.
- Two of the females gave birth in July 2009 and January 2010 (to babies conceived at LOLA).



- The reintroduced bonobos spend more and more time travelling in the tree tops and have progressively widened their range to approximately 10-12 Km from the isolation enclosure. They have explored not only the banks of the Lopori River, but have also ranged quite far inland in search of favoured fruit and plants.



Initial results have also confirmed the importance of community mobilisation—through educational activities, provision of tangible benefits to the population, and an effective mechanism to ensure that all parties follow through on their commitments—to secure a safe and supportive environment for the reintroduction.

Unexpected outcome of the reintroduction, the released bonobos themselves have proved to be an excellent ‘tool’ for raising awareness for the protection of their species. They have aroused great curiosity and enthusiasm in both the local population and passers-by in their canoes, many of which travel long distances from deep in the bonobo habitat. Since June 2009, over 10.000 people have discovered the bonobos in this way.



ABC is collaborating with researchers from Duke University (North Carolina, USA) in order to document the reintroduction process and the results achieved so far, for publication in a scientific journal.

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