

# ★ ★ ★ Planete bonobo ★ ★ ★

## D-day minus 1: 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009

"Hello? It's Mary! It's Brian, it's Nicole, it's Christine, Marie, Anne..." "How are you feeling on the eve of the big day? I wanted to wish you the best of luck! And let you know that we are behind you, you and the first 9 bonobos candidates for the reintroduction, etc, etc.!"

So many of you thought of us on this day and expressed your solidarity, be it by phone or by e-mail! I thank you all!

How do I feel? I guess, just as a father does as he gives away his daughter's hand to the young man who will lead her into a new life. He must ask himself so many of the same questions that I am asking myself! Will they be as happy as they were here with us...? But also: What great joy to be able to give them a new life...! For our bonobos to finally return to the forest! To think that, in a few days, they will discover the forest of their ancestors! A cocktail of emotions, a mixture of joy and anxiety! Put simply, that is my state of mind today!



For several years I have been preparing myself intensively for this separation. I have so many times dreamt of this return to "the origins". I have played nearly every step of these next few days in my mind a hundred times before, without always been able to let go of those nagging little doubts.

Once we have completed the heavy administrative pre-release preparations, the steps imposed by the IUCN guidelines, all kinds of official presentations, and the last minute calls to make sure that all the wheels and cogs of the machine are fully oiled and ready to go smoothly, it is finally D-day: the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2009!

## D-Day

### On the veterinary side, an armada!



At 2:30 am, everyone is on the deck: Suzy Kwetuenda, our biologist, who will be responsible for post-release monitoring and truly knows the bonobos; and the keepers Jean-Claude, Stany and Philippe, ready to help as we pre-medicate and anaesthetise the 9 bonobos candidates for release.

The bonobos had been separated in groups of 3 in the night shelters of enclosure 2, that of their quarantine and pre-release training.

W.S.P.A.'s Nick de Souza is there. He has arrived from Tanzania especially for the occasion. Since 1993, W.S.P.A. has accompanied me through all the important stages of my work with the bonobos. And there are here again for this key milestone of returning the bonobos to the forest. Nick is the vet for all the big moments at our sanctuary!



"When Nick comes to LOLA, we unroll the red carpet!" the staff says. His calm nature, his vast experience and his love of animals have made him a legend here. Not to mention that being a Kenyan, language is no barrier, he speaks Swahili with a large number of our staff!<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>As a reminder, WSPA and Garry Richardson were at our side from the very first moments of my association at the Kinshasa Zoological Gardens, then at the Kinshasa Veterinary clinic with our first bonobos, and yet again for the construction of our first Nursery-Sanctuary at TASOK. They helped build the first enclosure at Lola ya Bonobo along with its night shelter and were at our sides for the transfer of the bonobos to Lola ya Bonobo, and again for the transfer of the 4 bonobos from INRB. Nick, Garry and WSPA have always been present right beside us. Allow me to take this opportunity to express my greatest and most sincere gratitude for their trust and fidelity to A.B.C. for over 16 years.



By his sides, an armada of young vets: Marie-Laure, who since May 1<sup>st</sup> is in charge of health care at Lola; Michel Halbwx of M.P.I., who has for almost two years been following, from Leipzig and at times from Lola, the steps taken by Crispin for the rigorous veterinary preparation of our bonobos in view of the release;

Clemence, our Congolese vet, Anne-Marie our nurse and Fanny Mehl, another volunteer vet who has offered to stay with Marielle at the reintroduction site in Basankusu.

Dr Steve of INRB (the National Institute for Biomedical Research) will work with Michel and take the final blood samples, in line with the "guidelines" of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

8:30 am, the truck from the airline company Air Kasai arrives at N'djili airport. The flight is on a Sunday morning, and we are able to make the most of the empty roads on our way from Lola. All our men are wearing their "Rawbank" shirts and caps, to thank them for their support for our PR campaign in the local press and the creation of a 52 minute documentary which will be produced by Florent Matheron, Christine d'Hauthuille and my daughter Fanny over the next few months. We wanted this film to be free of rights, so that it might be shown on local TV stations.

The national radio, the UN's Radio Okapi and AFP are all on the case! And Danila Assice will be our official photographer; she has just finished a beautiful exposition at the "Galerie du fleuve" in Kinshasa.

The Congolese Airline Traffic Control office (RVA), managed by her husband Jean, will do all they can to ensure a rapid transfer of the bonobos at both airports. A precious help!

And what collaboration between all the services: Environment, veterinary, police, RVA... It is like magic! Like clockwork!

As for me, I have decided (not without pain) that I will not go and crowd their



ranks. Too scared that my presence could be seen as useless or as an excuse for added stress, I allow those precious moments to be taken away from me! And I even go further, would you believe it? I give over my seat in the cargo plane that will take the bonobos the 850 km to Basankusu. I will travel in the other, passenger plane.

"Leave it!" I whisper to Suzy, who is telling me that we would both be very useful in case there is a problem. "When the time comes to open the cages, you and I will walk alongside the bonobos as they go and find their freedom!"

### Arrival at Basankusu

Last week, Pierrot had prepped the local authorities to help us with as discreet an arrival as possible in order to minimise the bonobos' stress levels. We have worked at length with Air Kasai to prepare a smooth transfer, and thanks to their Antonov 26 and its large back door, we have been able to use large and roomy cages. Suzy, Fanny Mehl (the volunteer vet), Stany and I are (alas!) all passengers on the regular flight to Basankusu.

The others - Nick de Souza of WSPA, Michel Halbwx of MPI, Marie-Laure Doppagne for the veterinary follow-up, Florent Matheron and Danila Assice for film and photography - have embarked in the cargo plane with the bonobos: Etumbe and her son Mbano, Max, Lomami, Beni, Lisala, Lukaya, Lomela and Kubulu.

The cargo flies direct from Kinshasa to Basankusu.

They therefore arrive a little before us, who had a stop-over in Mbandaka, the administrative centre of the Province of Equateur. On board of our flight - and this is such a new occurrence that I have to mention it - is the first group of visitors travelling with a new tourist company "Go-Congo". About ten Belgian men, for the most part Dutch-speaking, who will spend 3 weeks in the area, starting with Lisala. "Does our country not seem safe enough for them to have brought their wives?" asks my neighbour.



I smile, thinking of my long, solitary, moon-lit rides on dug-out canoes, "lost" in the middle of the forest, where, with the driver leading me, I feel much safer than at 8 pm on a Saturday evening in the Paris underground! It may make you laugh, but to each their exoticism and fears of the unknown!

The landing at Mbandaka is enough to knock out one of the men; he lays on the ground for 10 minutes, as white as a sheet. I think to myself that his first Saturday night partying in Kinshasa has wiped him out, but the group prefers to put it down to cabin pressure. "That's strange, the others didn't feel a thing..." says my neighbour, smiling perfidiously... I smile in return, hoping that the party had been well worth it!



The first thing I see through the window on landing at Basankusu is the huge crowd, the banners welcoming the bonobos, and the few cars owned by the local authorities. "Good God!" Stany exclaims, "How are we ever going to get out of there without the bonobos dying of fright?" I can't believe my eyes! But what else is there to do but deal with it?

Before even getting out of the plane, I see that the cages with the bonobos have already been transferred onto a truck from CCP<sup>1</sup>, as promised by their Assistant Managing Director, Mr. Elwin Blattner. How lucky we are to have that truck! It will transport the cages to the harbour at our house on the river bank of the Lulonga.



Thankfully, as they organised such a triumphant welcome by the population of Basankusu, the authorities have also mobilised the police force: no less than 40 police officers are there to maintain the crowd at a distance.

<sup>1</sup> *Congolese Plantation Company*

In front of a banner wishing a warm welcome back home to the bonobos of Lola, the authorities up to the highest level in the district stand in honour! And it is

hot! The tarps more or less hide the bonobos from sight, although their vocalisations can be heard by all! Lukaya seems to be the only one stressed out by all the surrounding noise.

The truck pulls away, the children all around already singing our local slogan "Banso pona bonobo" ("united for the bonobos"). A number of women are also singing and dancing, waving their dresses in welcome.



As we approach the ABC office, another group of police officers prevent the crowd from following the truck into our yard. I am riding in one of the local authorities' jeeps. The police is trying to disperse the crowd of youths, who are dying to see what they have never seen before... the "mokomboso" (chimp/bonobo) from their homeland!

I feel that I have to intervene, to give a helping hand to the police. I jump down from the jeep and stand right in front of the crowd who stops in their tracks. I thank them for their warm welcome, but ask for their understanding. I quickly explain: the fear, the stress and the tough day not nearly over yet for the bonobos. I ask that they control their enthusiasm. I promise that as soon as possible I will make it possible for them to see, one way or another, these native animals. And it works: the tension eases off!



Meanwhile in the garden, the cages are being unloaded. Marielle and Gladez have had an idea of genius: they had large wooden steps built to help unload the truck. The steps were at Basankusu airport to help load the truck, but - by some twist of their superb organisation - they have already arrived at the house to unload the bonobos...

(All this would have been so much simpler, of course, had this town not been left in utter destitution after decades of war. No use dreaming of an electric lift...!)



I suggest a short break for "refreshment and decompression" for the bonobos before loading up the raft and travelling up the Lulonga and Lopori rivers to finally reach Mombengele, where we will disembark after the hour long journey.

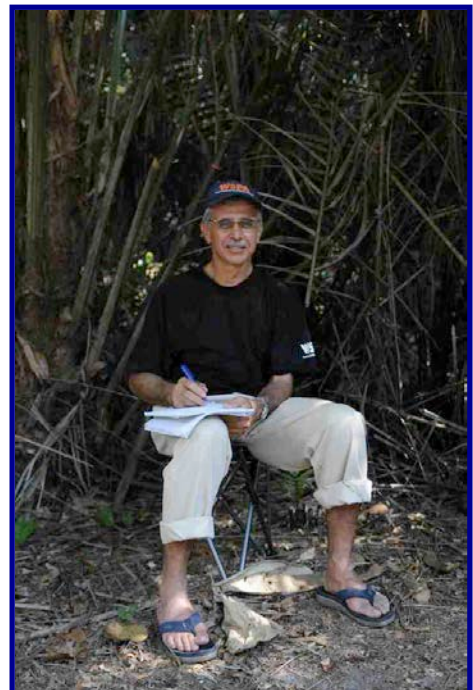


Most of the bonobos are very calm. They are looking around, slightly surprised, searching my eyes for an explanation for this disturbance. Little Mbano and his mother Etumbe are calmly nibbling on a sugar cane. Only the females Lukaya and Lisala are trembling with stress and impatience.

Very few accept the water offered to them.

"Let's go!" says Nick, "we have to load the cages". He directs the operation with the armada of vets. I step back and like a fly on the wall, I observe from afar. I watch mostly the bonobos. I don't want to increase the pressure that is already palpable. We are still within schedule. I leave those who have things in hand to manage the situation.

I learn from Marielle that the "authorities" want to accompany the bonobos to the release site. A canoe had to be set aside for them, their bodyguards... a full delegation! Our big "Nkumu" (traditional chief), wearing his 32 leopard teeth, also wants to be a part of it all. "But of course!" I respond, somewhere between laughs and tears, "at this point, why not?"



The convoy of canoes surrounds the raft. The bonobos are vocalising. The cages are partly covered, allowing a breeze to blow through. Lukaya is still very nervous and shakes her cage with surprising strength from time to time. Our canoes go ahead to install the authorities, first row in the tunnel that leads to the isolation enclosure. It was going to be difficult enough to organise as it was, but with the added pressure of a big show... We are far from all the scenarios we had imagined!!!



Here is the raft arriving. It is gently easing in. Is the driver under too much stress? He has positioned the raft to enter the electric archway, when suddenly he veers off, tearing down the first electrified arch, and then the second, 5 meters away! Marielle is pale with shock, and so I am. Then we both burst out laughing: what else is there to do when the situation is so catastrophic?

On top of that, we have behind us that delegation of officials in their suits, who almost seem to be expecting us to be serving them a cocktail... It is becoming just too surreal!!! Quick! We must get the electricity back up and running again or we will never be able to let the bonobos out of their cages before nightfall! We unload the cages from the raft, carrying them into the isolation enclosure to a shaded spot under the little island of trees in the centre. Stany, Suzy and the vets are comforting the bonobos still locked in their cages.



As the saying goes: "misery loves company". While all this commotion is happening at Mombengele, a pregnant woman on the opposite bank of the river (in the village of Elonda where our camp is based) falls into the water and drowns. Our men, too preoccupied by the collapsed arches of the tunnel, do not notice the cries for help from the village to pull her out of the water. They later explain that they would surely have arrived too late to find a body drowned in the black waters of the Lopori....



In the end, it turns out that the presence of the authorities is a good thing: in little time an angry delegation arrives at the enclosure from the opposite bank, soon calmed down by the Police Chief and the District Head. But what a misfortune! We already had so much to deal with when we only had the bonobos to manage, add to that the delegation of officials, the collapsing of the electric tunnel... and now the angry villagers! I do my best to calm everyone, promising to deal with it all in due time. The villagers head back home... but isn't this our new home too?



The authorities at last decide it is time for them to head back, but they insist on leaving a dozen police officers at our camp in case of any further vindications from the villagers. I refuse, explaining that it is now our village too and that we will sort it all out among ourselves. No use! The police officers, dressed like Robocop, are there to stay. Eventually at last, everyone else goes....



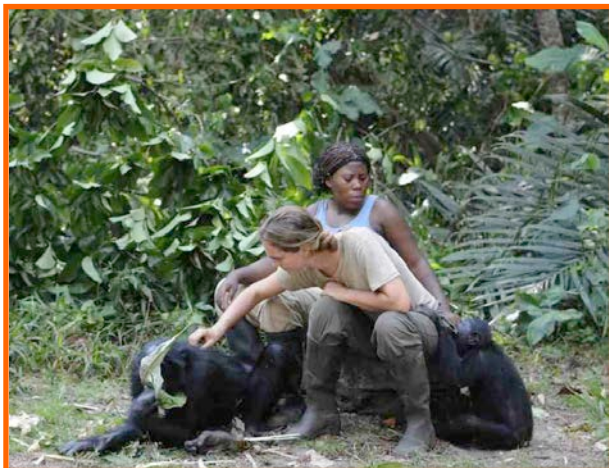
We switch off the electricity in the tunnel. Stany, Suzy and I keep for ourselves the magical moment of opening the cages. I chose to do so progressively, opening the doors one by one, managing the stress of each individual one at a time. We begin with Etumbe and her little Mbano. They first head towards the other cages, then they come over to us.

I reassure Etumbe, stroking her rump. She wanders over to Suzy, also presenting, looking for reassurance. The alliance is formed. Etumbe seems calm. Mbano gambols around, discovering the enclosure. Very rapidly, they are in trust; they drink a bit and begin to eat the food that we have scattered around.



The operation lasted about 10 minutes. "Next!" I say to Stany. "Kubulu perhaps?" suggests Suzy. "OK, let's go for the little favourite!"

And so it goes for all of them, leaving Max for last. An hour later, they have all satisfied their hunger. Marielle had thought to bring a few dry bundles of hay. Some of them have climbed up into the trees.



At nightfall, we leave them to themselves locked in their enclosure.

The canoe brings us back to camp, where, every now and then, we can hear their vocalisations, carried by the wind despite the 600 meters of river separating us!

Back at the Ekolo camp, the presence of the dozen hungry policemen, who of course had not been planned for, somewhat spoils that moment of relaxation which we are in dire need of!

The next morning was supposed to be dedicated exclusively to the bonobos, but we end up also having to deal with the death, the family, the search for the body, the investigation by a police chief, greedy for money and who is taking advantage of his ability to keep our men "hostage" to the needs of the investigation! I eventually manage to negotiate a few days' freedom for them!

Inside the enclosure, the bonobos have begun to resume their normal behaviour. The vets conduct yet one more final "security" test for TB. The technician starts repair work on the tunnel. At the end of the day, the bent poles and broken cables have been fixed thanks to "Article 15 of the Congolese Constitution", which always find a solution to all problems, for better or for worse...





After last month's PASA meeting at Columbus, Ohio (USA), the pressing recommendations of our colleagues Aliette Jamart and Estelle Raballan to use telemetric collars for locating and following our released animals have caused me to worry about whether our group is going to stay together.

Their groups of chimps had always scattered in the first few days after release. However, in our swampy forest, I had chosen not to use the collars, and their urgent advice had arrived too late, far too close to the release date. The cohesion of our group had thus become my first priority, or rather my greatest worry!

I had therefore decided, in agreement with Marielle and Suzy, to keep the bonobos a few days in the isolation enclosure (which is actually not so small: 25m x 25m) to give them time to adapt to their new environment.

However, Lisala had decided otherwise! On the Tuesday morning, using her very own technique and much to our amusement, she made herself to be the first ever self-released bonobo! Climbing up the long unfolded leaves of a palm tree, as if they were stilts, she climbed vertically up, spreading and balancing her weight to make sure the leaves wouldn't buckle under her weight, then assessing her position relative to the electric fence she gently threw her weight and let herself drop on the other side of the fence....



And so that is how the world's first ever bonobo release happened. One thing is for sure, it will stay in our memories as... a rather spontaneous event!

The following morning, Lukaya, having paid close attention to the lesson given by her friend, followed the same path out! She however climbed back into the enclosure at the end of the day to spend the night with the others, whilst Lisala prepared a new nest for herself in the trees nearby.

"They're ready!" Suzy exclaims. "Let's go!" we all reply in unison. Stany opens the enclosure door and we are off, Suzy and I, to discover the forest of Mombengele with the bonobos. We look at each other, our hearts heavy with emotion.





Max is not so fond of the new people in our group: he gathers his branches and charges several times.

We head off down transect zero. Leading the way are Lisala, Kubulu, Lomami and Beni. Lomela is very anxious, seeking reassurance by holding on to Lukaya and whimpering. Lukaya

offers Lomela a brief GG (genito-genital) rub as reassurance. She clearly wants to get rid of the little cry-baby! She has better things to do, a whole new forest to discover!

Max doesn't tire of displaying towards Ibrahim; then all of a sudden Etumbe pounces on him as well, trying to go for the fingers! We are lucky: no harm done. Stany suggests that we reduce the number of visitors and heads back to the enclosure with Ibrahim.

We carry on along transect zero, stepping over large pools of water where we encourage the bonobos to drink, although they don't seem to really appreciate the new taste or perhaps the "Coca-cola" colour of the water!

We head back to camp in the evening, having spent a large part of our time protecting one or another person from the intimidations of the bonobos. Poor Marie-Laure for instance was a choice target of Lomami's clowning about.

During one of our hikes through the forest, as we stop to let the bonobos discover all the novelties around, I notice the empty shells of a yellow fruit scattered on the ground. I have not heard any of the vocalisations that are typical of bonobos when they savour a prize food, so I am astonished looking up to discover Lisala, sitting alone at the top of the tree, stuffing herself with the red flesh of the little fruit, hiding from the others.

When she comes back down, her stained lips tell of her hidden greed. I call the other bonobos to the foot of the tree and show them the empty shells. They lick them eagerly, but despite my efforts at pointing to the top of the tree, none of them seem to understand where the fruit has come from.

"They have still a lot to learn!" says Suzy.



Etumbe is heavy with her pregnancy - an advantage for us as she slows down the group with her frequent naps! She is also the one showing the most energy in looking for food, pulling up young (and not so young) palm tree shoots. Stripping the stems of the amaranth plant is nothing new for them: we have them at Lola. We do feel a bit

sorry for poor little Mbano though: he is not strong enough to pull up the stems, all he can do is to follow the others, picking up the leftovers dropped by the older ones...

In the evening, they all nest high up in the trees surrounding the enclosure, all but Max, our gorilla<sup>1</sup>, who wanders off into transect zero and builds a nest for himself right on the ground.

We are pleased to see that within a few days, Max too begins to climb into the canopy of the trees and eventually starts building nests in the trees as well. We also notice that Mbano is no longer allowed to sleep with his mother, Etumbe. He whimpers all he can, trying to get into her nest by all means possible, only to be rejected again and again. Etumbe is having none of it!

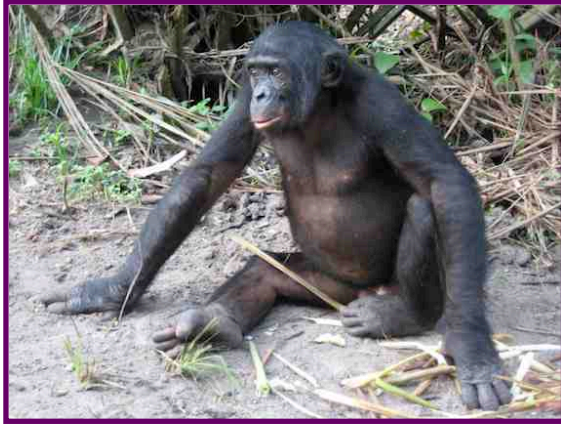
Willy-nilly, Mbano turns to his "aunties" Lukaya and Lisala and finally little Lomela and him soon learn to build comfortable little nests of their own nearby one or other of the grown-up's nests. Since then, even at naptime, it is not uncommon to see them folding a few sticks and leaves on a branch overhanging the river to make a simple day-nest where they lie with satisfaction at their ingenuity.

On the days that follow, we continue our hikes through the forest, hoping to show them the banks of the wide Lopori River, its white sandy beaches bordered with the wild ginger which they like so much - be it the shoots, the leaves or the sour fruit which at Lola we call "Tondolo".

<sup>1</sup>Max was rescued on 19 May 1989 by the PPG in Congo Brazzaville. He spent a long-time there in close proximity with the gorillas and has kept to this day some peculiar vocalisations which are

*certainly not part of the typical bonobo repertoire, but which seem to give him a "mysterious, sexy and exotic vibe" in the eyes of the female bonobos...*

Kubulu is often up ahead, vocalising at every new discovery.



Suddenly, a little clearing reveals the river. Lisala, upright with her arms behind her back, in perfect bipedal walk, goes over to the water, then down into it, soaking her feet. She calls to the rest of the group which stands dumbstruck in front of this wide expanse of dark water running peacefully at their feet...

"Genius" (as we often call Lisala) leans over and with her hand scoops up some water to her mouth. She vocalises and repeats the same gesture several times. Lomela, a keen drinker back at Lola, imitates her but spats out the water... "That's not a great start!" I muse to myself.

But I am proven wrong over the following days: Lomela start regularly drinking from the river, as well as from the pools that are common throughout the swampy forest.



Suzy and I spend long hours watching the bonobos discover the forest.

From day to day, we notice that they are increasingly moving about in the canopy, preferring it to the paths made by the transects we have traced.

"That's good!" declares Suzy, "from early September, the water level will rise, the forest will flood, but it shouldn't hinder them too much."

Since then, they have adopted a regular "schedule" which reassures me and increasingly convinces me that the group isn't going to break-up. They nest at



one of two locations, depending mostly on where Etumbe decides to settle that night.

The enclosure remains the main landmark, and the beach at Mombengele - the departure point for their exploration into the forest to the west and north. In the evenings, they come back at around 4 pm and "bang on" 5:10 pm Lisala gives the signal to head off up into the treetops to build their nests. We can hear a few squeaks here and there, especially from the two little ones, Lomela and Mbano.

Max is always the one closing the march, waiting a bit to observe us. Then eventually, around 6 pm, he climbs up and away from us to build his nest in the canopy.



It is the rainy season, also known as the "caterpillar season", a season which brings valued protein to these poverty stricken, riparian tribes, who have lived the same way for centuries and centuries.

At night in my little hut, as the thunder growls and the rain falls down in sheets, I can't help but feel sorry for our bonobos, most certainly shivering under the cold rain, and I ask myself if I have made the right decision for them or if the paradise that I have given them isn't a little less sweet tasting than it may have seemed?

However, when Suzy and I cross the mist-covered river at 6:30 am the next morning and the bonobos welcome us in their usual way, as if the night has been no different than any other, I am reassured in my conviction that the idea of freedom (that which make mankind stand up as one) also sometimes has the bitter taste of sacrifice, yet freedom is such a strong ideal that it can carry them, unite them, strengthen them, and that is surely not so far from happiness!

Bonobo, I can not read your souls, only look deep into your eyes when you come to meet my gaze. This freedom which I have wanted for you and that you now have little choice but to put up with... live it! And what if I was wrong? What if Lola was your paradise??...

Go, go deeper into this forest! It is yours, discover it and return one day to look me in the eyes and show me what I long to see more than anything: The joy of living free in the forest of your ancestors!