

Planete bonobo

April & May 2009

The death of Leki

I look deep into Semendwa's eyes, or maybe, she looks deep into my soul... She has been holding the body of her dead infant in her arms since yesterday. However, she's not holding the baby the same way as before, she is slowly becoming detached, she moves the baby's arms, looks at him in a way that intimately tells me that she knows he is dead. Only just yesterday, she was holding him close to her while he struggled to breathe, desperately trying to resist the terrible virus which had already snuffed out the lives of three other of Lola's bonobos before it. Pity our little « Leki ya Elikya » !



He was born at the height of a mortal epidemic, so when our keepers told me that he "had a runny nose", I knew in my heart that he would be too weak to beat the virus. Semendwa paces back and forth, looking deep into my eyes. Today, yet once again and ever still more, I want to cross over that line that separates our two worlds. Or maybe the line that some people want to maintain to keep our two worlds apart...

Be careful! This is the sin of anthropomorphism! How arrogant! How incompetent can you be, Madame André?! May those who have never experienced such emotions with Great Apes cast the first stone...

Semendwa comes back towards us; she lifts up his already bloated little body one last time, hands it to us, takes it back and turns, only to come back once again. Finally, she abandons it on the ground and leaves, not even turning back for a final glance.

I think to myself that it is past time that we go and seek out the traditional Chief of our land, bringing him offerings for his ancestors who protect the forest of Lola! We will go to the top of "Lola peak" to pour palm oil on the soil and offer up to the venerable ancestors the nine kola nuts! We will tell them our misfortunes and beseech their leniency because in the past they have so often protected our bonobos when they have been in turmoil!



The release preparations - behavioral observations of the bonobos tentatively selected for release and preparations for their future life in the wild - are all now resuming.

On April 1st, Crispin leaves « Lola Ya Bonobo » for good. It is his choice and I respect it, even if this decision leaves me with a feeling of unfulfilled business given that we are only two months away from the reintroduction and that we have together faced so many challenges. But Lola is a winning team! Those remaining all stick together and we resume our staff meetings with drive and spirit.

The wounds of recent events are still fresh and deeply etched inside all of us, but we are now able to take "a breather". Still anxious, we all remain vigilant. Such devastating events had not hit us since the terrible and deadly EMCV¹ epidemic back in 2003. I must admit now that I wrote part of this newsletter before that of first quarter 2009 because I was honestly incapable of recounting so much suffering occurring in such close succession: Mimia and her baby, our beautiful Lodja, Kindu, the acrobatic Mixa and little Leki, the only "little brother" at Lola. And also, closer to home, the death of my own sister and Crispin's departure.

This time around, I'm going to make some of my own offerings to my guardian angel! And she seems to take notice!

A peaceful wind returns

On May 1st, Dr Marie-Laure Doppagne accepts a volunteer position as ABC veterinary coordinator. Marielle Puit, who has just left PPG (Project Protection Gorilla) in the Congo and is visiting family members in the DRC, graciously

¹ *Encephalo-Myocarditis Virus*

accepts to work for six months on our release program. She brings to us her experience with gorilla reintroductions in neighboring Congo; she takes on the responsibility of coordinating the release of our bonobos and immediately sets up camp in Basankusu. My colleague Aliette Jamart from « Help-Congo » in Pointe Noire is sending me an Eco-Guard from her team, a RD-Congolese who wants to return home and is delighted to find work so fast!

All this over the course of one week! So what do we say? Well, we say a big "Thank you!" to our guardian angel!... And we leave for Basankusu....



Our « Château Margaux » is in danger

Marielle and I are accompanied by Valérie Urman from French newspaper "Journal du Dimanche", who has come to the DRC to report on our last preparatory trip before the release. I am taking Marielle for the first time to Basankusu, to introduce her as Reintroduction Project Coordinator to our new staff and the local authorities.

Marie-Pierre and Delphine, nearing the end of their stay at Lola, offer us a good bottle of wine: "Make a toast for us in Basankusu to the future success of the release!" Both women are fervent supporters of Lola ya Bonobo and of ABE².



The precious nectar is packed and placed in the trolley for the trip like a "Kanzi" (buried treasure). Unfortunately, when embarking at N'djili airport, we are told that international security measures have been put into effect in the DRC... as of today! "No liquids in carry-ons!" says the security agent with a wide smile, putting his hand on the precious bottle! "Good gracious!" exclaims Valérie, who had certainly been dreaming of the great moment when the bottle would be uncorked. "All is lost!" Marielle echoes. Bye bye to our dreams! Wait a moment! We will certainly be able to negotiate with this charming agent, whose basket is already overflowing with all type of bottles confiscated since the morning. A little green bill, as well as the number of bottles that he has already confiscated and may be more to his personal tastes,

² Our sister association in Europe: Amis des Bonobos en Europe (Friends of bonobos in Europe). For more information, visit www.amidesbonobos.org

ease him in his decision. We get both our bottle of "Château Margaux" and our smiles back!

Marielle discovers Basankusu, and with it all the work that remains to be done before the arrival of the bonobos! She quickly takes charge and is making the right decisions.

Everything is going well. We are on the same wavelength. Her ideas match my own: a reintroduction project is multi-directional. Today, through hard-earned



Blaise in awareness-raising mode

experience, we now know that the majority of preparation work for a project like ours, or for the creation of a new National Park or Natural Reserve, does not relate to handling the animals to be released or managing the space to be occupied. 80% of the problems that we will have to deal with are related to our relations with the local human population.

This is particularly true in the DRC, which has emerged from such a long period of abandonment. This population, which cannot yet count on State services, directs all its hopes towards any NGO or economic actor that is willing to set up activities in the area. An amalgam is quickly made: You want to work here? You must first help us! Their demands are quite valid, but... who can really replace the State? Can we repair roads, rebuild schools and hospitals, or help support dispensaries, all the while also providing work to everyone?

But their misery and their kindness quickly convinces you to tirelessly seek out partners to come and assist them.

Humanitarian NGOs, such as Caritas or NHV, can organize short seminars to help them take charge of their own development.



Distribution of medicines



Donation of a first aid kit

Pierrot had already initiated all these meetings; they were part of our pre-release program. They must imperatively be continued.

And of course, Marielle always has an idea or two in her head! She hires a sociologist, Alphonse, to help us with our surveys. He knows the place well; he does not belong to any of the local ethnic groups and therefore he is considered as someone neutral by all involved. He will certainly be of precious assistance in working towards our goals and avoiding any risk of tension.

We are now providing support to education and health services all around EKOLO YA BONOBO.³

30 days to countdown already....



There is still so much to be done! But on May 14th, I head off for the USA to meet up with my 18 colleagues for the 10 year anniversary of the creation of PASA. For the first time ever, this meeting is to be held in the USA: in Columbus, Ohio.

The Columbus Zoo, and particularly its Conservation Department headed by Rebecca Rose, really did a fantastic job organizing this meeting. It was a wonderful success and we were fortunate to have Harvard professor Richard Wrangham as our guest of honor. He explained, with humor and joy, why he is such a PASA fan. Doug Cress, PASA Executive Director, presented the excellent work carried out by the Pan African sanctuaries. Everyone deserved and received a standing ovation!

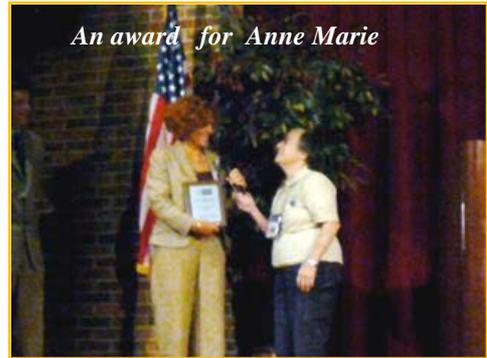


Anne-Marie honored at the PASA meeting!

Anne-Marie, our nurse, is to receive an « Award » from PASA! The David Siddle award, named after the late David Siddle, who passed away in 2006 and who was one of our generation's pioneers, one of those who, like us, created the first Pan African sanctuaries for Great Apes and are the founding members of PASA. This « Award » recognizes the best employees of the PASA sanctuaries.

³ We support 5 primary schools and 2 secondary schools within the Pô zone; 3 primary schools and 1 secondary school in the Kodoro zone; the school at Eleke, as well as the new primary school at Elonda, where our base camp is located. All these schools have received books, didactic materials, blackboards, etc... thanks to support from France's Social Development Fund. In addition, 4 maternity wards were outfitted thanks to support we obtained for them from the Canadian Embassy: mattresses, equipment for minor operations, sterilization material, medicine, etc.

But despite all of our efforts to quickly obtain a passport and a visa, Anne-Marie will not succeed in obtaining the authorization to travel to the United States from the local American Consulate. And so she will not be able to take the flight with me. We are all very sad: It was to be the trip of her lifetime! And thus I received Anne-Marie's award from Sheila, David Siddle's wife. I thanked the audience on behalf of Anne-Marie, with tears in my eyes for this beautiful moment which she did not have the chance to experience....



I am so proud for Lola Ya Bonobo: Four awards in the same year! It's wonderful!

Friends of bonobos

We take advantage of this opportunity to organize the annual meeting of the Board of Directors of the American based « Friends of Bonobos » Association. Our President, Dominique, is here: she nearly always comes with me to the PASA meetings. Brian Hare and his wife, Vanessa Woods, have made the trip up from



At PASA 2009 with Mary Rose

North Carolina. Mary Rose from the « Sulatalu Fund for Great Apes » is also present, as well as Becky Rose, who never misses a meeting. Almost all of us are in attendance.... We are so happy to be together again! Being so close to the transfer of the bonobos to EKOLO in Equateur Province, there is indeed a lot to talk about!

This time, my friends,
We're on the final stretch!

