

★ ★ ★ Planete Bonobo ★ ★ ★

Last quarter 2009

Fanny and I have just arrived in Basankusu. But talk about our bad luck: There we are both with bad colds and our dreams of going with Suzy and the trackers into the Ekolo forest have disappeared into thin air along with our sneezes! This time, we will have to be satisfied with watching the bonobos from the pirogue if and when they came close to the river.

Suzy and the trackers don't have it easy! The water level is almost at its yearly peak. The team follows the bonobos through the forest, sometimes with water up to their waists, while the bonobos move easily in the tree canopy, from one patch of solid ground to the next. We often meet up with Suzy and the trackers at the end of the day, when the bonobos have decided to nest, and they are often soaked to their waists. It is almost a handicap to be walking with such high boots!

The Misadventures of Beni

Out of nowhere, on a Tuesday around 4.00 pm, we get a call from Suzy: "Beni has a big gash in his forearm. It isn't bleeding much, but the cut seems to be deep. Beni has his right arm bent and the other bonobos are coming over to lick his wound. They're heading toward Mombengele beach."

Fanny, Gladez, a few "eco-guards" just back from their anti-poaching patrol, and I go to meet them. Gladez is proudly bearing her brand new camcorder that her mother had sent her for Christmas. The camera with its 60x optical zoom allows Fanny to determine how serious the wound is. She decides it would be best to stitch the wound to allow it to heal faster, given that Beni is one of those who love walking through the swamps with water up to the armpits!



A plan to isolate Beni is worked out. We need to get him alone someplace where Fanny will be able to do the surgery.

The bonobo group is headed back to the isolation enclosure; everyone goes in, except Beni who stays behind. That is it, our lucky chance! Quietly, we close the door behind the group, who couldn't care less. (Suzy has kept on doing this as an exercise every now and then.) But the water level is very high near the enclosure, and we want to do the surgery out of the bonobos' sight. Fanny and Suzy head out in the pirogue to a small beach nicely tucked away in the forest nearby. They walk back to join Beni, comfort him, groom him, and then Fanny rubs the dose of Domitor in his mouth. After a few minutes, he is ready to receive the anaesthesia injection. All of this happens in total silence and with indifference of the others, who only get slightly upset when we move Beni in the pirogue and out of their sight. But they don't call out, they are trusting in us... The pirogue brings Beni back into the tunnel leading to the isolation enclosure.

"I'll operate on him in here!" declares Fanny.



I quickly improvise an operating table. Fanny's know-how is impressive! The various muscular planes are sutured and she finishes with an invisible suture on the surface, stitches worthy of a CHANEL dressmaker. "That way, at least the others won't be tempted to pull out the stitches... At least I hope not!" she concludes. We take away the tarp that had kept us hidden from the curious bunch

and lead Beni back into the isolation enclosure as he's already coming around from the anaesthesia. We hope to be able to keep him separated from the group for a few days. Confident that their pal is okay, they are all already leaving us to go and nest not far from the enclosure.



So Beni makes himself a nest in the enclosure and we head back to camp to celebrate the happy ending of an episode that might have caused Suzy some real trouble had Fanny not been there! With only one plane per week flying Kinshasa to Basankusu, it might have been quite a while before anything could have been

done! We decide that it is high time we sought out a vet willing to volunteer at "Ekolo ya bonobo" on a renewable six-month basis!



This gives me a chance to congratulate our dream team (Suzy and Gladez), and to tell them how much I regret not having been able to be there with them when Fanny, along with the help of her vet friend Carole, brilliantly organized the return of the three trouble-makers to Lola ya bonobo a few weeks back! (See our blog posts on this adventure.)

The work at Ekolo

After Marielle Puit's departure in September, Suzy Kwetuenda was named chief of the reintroduction project.

From the very beginning, in Marielle's footsteps, we had seen the brilliant student of Professor Brian Hare demonstrate her full capacities. Her study of the bonobos has become a real passion! Having myself experienced that particular state of mind so well, I think that Ekolo is the perfect place for her to be! With her main priorities being to maintain the good health and well-being of the reintroduced bonobos



and ensuring their monitoring in the forest, she leads gently but firmly some twenty field staff: the trackers who follow the bonobos in their roaming all day long; the eco-guides in their pirogues busy each day educating the local people about protecting the bonobos; and the eco-guards who go on anti-poaching patrols in the forest to

prevent hunters from setting their deadly traps.

That is a big responsibility indeed! Without forgetting management of the camp where military discipline reigns: store keeping under Thomas' watchful eyes, the kitchen of "Mama Chief", construction of the last remaining facilities. Of course, Suzy is not alone to do all of this! Marielle had hired the "right hand men" for each department and they have proved up to the task.

Aside for the bonobos, micro projects for the local population have become the main activity of ABC. In Basankusu, Alphonse, our sociologist, is in charge of ABC's socio-economic activities as well as relations with the local administration. Given his expertise, Marielle had asked him to take over the socio-economic surveys that Pierrot had started in the early stages of the release preparations:



We had to better understand our neighbors settled along the Lopori River and learn about their problems caused by a long period of isolation and the suspension of all trading operations with the capital city during the decade of war. *(In the last ten years, Equateur Province has twice been occupied by various armed rebel factions, resulting in the closing of businesses, lootings, and the suspension of all river traffic.*

This means no boat bringing goods from Kinshasa and no way to send their local products, like corn, caterpillars, etc... to the capital. As a result, they returned to their lives of yesteryear, living in isolation and having to rely even more on the forest to survive with subsistence gathering, fishing, and hunting.)

We also had to determine the impact of our reintroduction project on the daily lives of the local population. Thusly, thanks to partners such as France's Social Development Fund and the Canadian Embassy in the DRC, we have been able to promptly respond to some of their expectations. *(We will soon post on our website a list of the socio-economic projects implemented by ABC around Ekolo ya Bonobo.)*



Distribution of essential meds

ABC and AWF (the African Wildlife Foundation) are regularly taken to task by all kinds of religious institutions and "creationist" associations calling to their

minions to oppose people like us for "daring to confront God who created only man in His own image, and lowering him to the level of some vulgar animals!"



Our work is to speak out, educating over and over again, explaining the multiple aspects of bio-diversity. The bonobo, a natural treasure in the Congo, a resource that we want to rescue from its predicted disappearance, since its preservation also means hope for human development within this immense forested land. Provided we are granted peace, eco-tourism will soon develop; in the meantime, we are

diversifying our actions. If protection of bonobos is our goal, our objectives for the implantation of our project go hand in hand with helping the local people.

I would say that today, the bonobos take up 30% of our activities, while 70% is devoted to the villages along the river! A fact that one discovers as soon one settles in here! But in return, the fiery Equateur temperament pays you back your efforts in human warmth and in smiles... What a chemistry!



And so Mathieu continues the follow-up and the creation of new Village Development Committees (VDCs), which during these past few years have become a source of hope for a population hardly anybody has cared about for far too long.

Follow-up in the forest

Once back at Lola ya bonobo, our trouble-makers (Max, Lisala and Lomani) quickly found their old friends and their old habits. Meanwhile at Ekolo ya bonobo, Suzy, with the help of Zanna Clay of Saint Andrew's University, was able to resume working on the trackers' integration. Jerome, Va and Louise are the first to go into forest. They



follow the group of bonobos (Etumbe, her children Mbano and Nsomi, Beni, Kubulu, Lukaya and Lomela) all day long, until they settle in their nests for the

night. But what a difficult period! The water level is rising and like every year, it floods the whole forest in the central depression of the Congo Basin.

Since their release, the bonobos have turned into real tree-dwellers! That's not the case for our trackers, sometimes up to the waist in the black water! Nobody can predict which direction the bonobos are going to take. And even if they remain within a reasonable distance of the isolation enclosure and enjoy settling down for the night in the big trees at the beach north of Mombengele or at the beach to the south, during the day they often wander along the transects for many kilometers! Suzy and her team follow them. "They're still at school", she keeps saying, as if to excuse them.



The goal is to reach the point where they will stop paying attention to our presence. Kubulu, nicknamed "GPS" by the trackers, is the one who brings the men to the group whenever the bonobos get too far ahead. The group moves along, all the while eating young plants or seeds from wild fruit. These days, the forest is full of fresh tender rosy leaves. The bonobos enjoy this tremendously and stuff themselves for hours. Afterwards, they take long lazy naps, allowing the trackers a bit of relief on firm ground between two marshes. During these times, everything is very quiet in the undergrowth. Only the youngsters like Mbano and his 4 month-old little sister, Nsomi, keep



playing around Etumbe. The others are asleep, either in a hastily made nest or on the ground.

Heavy in her late pregnancy, Lukaya slows down the pace of this athletic group. How lucky we are to have those two females - one of them pregnant and the other lactating - as the "generals" leading the group during the big flood! They do not feel like pushing the group to discover new distant territories. Going 5 kilometers around the release site is quite enough! (Japanese behavioral scientists and their trackers say that the wild group they follow every day covers about the same distance. It is unusual for the group to go very far from its "epicenter.")



Now, Suzy declares, we should give those bonobos several months before thinking about new developments. They have been through a lot in the past twelve months! A six-month quarantine and training period, being transferred a thousand kilometers from their home, adapting to a new environment, new feeding habits (in terms of quantities and qualities) and also getting used to drinking the black water of the Lopori. Before Nsomi's birth, Mbano had to experience the separation from his mother, who no longer allowed him to sleep in her nest. Since some of them refused to share their space with humans, we had to return three adult bonobos back to Lola, which created an important void in their social structure! Then, they had to accept the trackers' presence. And soon, Lukaya will be giving birth... "That's enough for a while!" says Suzy (and Claudine!), let's keep them at this cruising speed for a while. Let's wait for the beginning of January and the end of the flood season before undertaking new adventures...

Meanwhile, back at Lola...

... we don't stay idle! Enclosure 3 has been transformed into a reintroduction training ground. It was decided that 12 young bonobos (between 7 and 8 years old), led by the two adults Tembo and Salonga with her baby, will start learning to share their space with trackers. Today a first group of six is being followed all day long by Ibrahim (who came especially from Basankusu for this), Jean-Claude, the keeper of enclosure 3, and Mama Yvonne, from the nursery.

At 8 am, food is left at various places in the forest. At 9 am, the group starts a three-hour stroll. Pause at noon for the trackers, and a stroll again in the afternoon. After two months, the results look promising: the bonobos are totally disinterested in being followed! Every now and then, our boarding visitors accompany them; and the bonobos rarely "cozy up" to them!



Even the nursery has entered a "pre-training" cycle, so that the older ones can already get used to more freedom. The "back-up nursery" with its wooded area is a new space for the elders to play in, with more distance from the Mamas.

Only the babies (Sandoa, Lomako and Kodoro) stay close to their surrogate mamas. Though ... Katako, as the eldest in the nursery group, often takes one of the babies with her to join the group of explorers!



We also attempted to separate Sake from her Mama Henriette (she has been in the nursery for more than three years and she is definitely not the most disciplined!!), but we had to cancel the plan. A very brief stay in enclosure 3, and quick, back to nursery! "I told you so", groaned Henriette, "She's difficult, but I knew she wasn't ready!" Okay! And so the "chief's daughter" took back the first rank in

the nursery.

You can still hear Mama Henriette mumbling every now and then that since then, Sake has regressed... But everyone else agrees this may be a bit overstated... especially when you see the turbulent little creature trying to sneak out through the enclosure door where a padlock has carelessly been left open!



Kinsuka's confiscation



In November, in cooperation with the inspectors from the Environment Ministry, we organized the confiscation of a small female, Kinsuka. Alas, in spite of all our efforts, we were unable to restore her to health: she was just too weak. Earlier in the year, we had almost succeeded in rescuing her from the grip of a trafficker, but in anger he stole away with her! The man hid her away, then eventually he handed over the little creature to his family, where we found her thanks to a neighbor's alert. The Environment inspectors did a good job at officially confiscating this tiny bonobo, but by that time, she was nothing more than skin and bones!

The man's wife said that he had gone back to Equateur Province to find more bushmeat and other animals, without leaving her any money to feed this bonobo! She didn't even have enough to feed her own children!



When they handed us the baby, a rope was eating into the flesh on her hips. Fanny gently cut it away, but Kinsuka didn't want to let go of it. She held it tightly in her small emaciated hands, as if it were her last treasure, her last suffering, too! She died the next day.

The death of Vanga

It is true that with their "4 hands", bonobos are real acrobats in trees. But accidents can happen too!

So in November, the "little crazy guys" of Enclosure 3 (those in training for release), were jumping from tree to tree, from branch to branch, when all of a sudden, Vanga fell! He fell on his head. A broken branch had stabbed through his thigh, most probably severing his femoral artery. Unconscious, he was brought back to us by Tembo, but then Tembo refused to let go of the inert body of his young friend whose blood was gushing out. When he finally let go of him, Clémence and Anne-Marie tried to stitch him back up. (Fanny was away with me at Ekolo.) But it was too late: Our little friend had already fallen into eternal sleep!



Vanga was a bonobo we all loved very much; he looked so much like my beautiful Boende (lost in 2003 during the epidemic of EMCV) that I had a special feeling for him. I had gone to fetch him on the campus of TASOK (the American School in Kinshasa), where he had been brought by plane from Vanga by a family of American missionaries. The father, a doctor, handed the bonobo to me, while his daughter begged me to take very good care of him. "I did!" I will tell her. But this time, good fortune was not with me.

Nioki is a mom!

And here is some good news to end this last newsletter of the year: Our "little" Nioki is now the mother of a small baby male! We have named him "Bomengo ya Lola", which means "wealth of paradise". In spite of initial difficulties with nursing, the young 11 year-old mother and her son have now joined the nursery where Mama Henriette will watch over the young mother's progress.



"Can you imagine how fast time has flown by?!" Valérie exclaims. "My sweet little Nioki has a baby!" (Nioki was so fragile when she arrived at the Sanctuary that Valérie personally took care of her, before handing her over to Mama Henriette. And a very delicate enterprise it was - "Italian style" we used to say, since the only food she would accept was spaghetti!!! See our Newsletter #3 from 2000.)



"Yes Grandma!" I reply, laughing. "Why don't you offer the staff a drink to celebrate?" No sooner said than done! A welcome drink for this new baby and plenty of laughs and toasts to his health!

Christmas at LOLA

At Lola ya bonobo, Santa Claus' bells are already ringing. A nice lunch, new games, Christmas songs for all our children, and the usual food package for a fine Christmas family dinner for every employee and other collaborators of ours. Suzy and Gladez return to Kinshasa for the holidays, Fanny leave for France to join her family... Valerie and Claudine will celebrate too! Let's all be merry!



A busy year is now behind us! You have shared, through the blog posts and the newsletter, all our joys, our happiness, but also all our sorrows. What a year full of emotions!

But let's look to the future. As Mama Henriette likes to say: "At Lola we always move forward!" Yes, you're right, Henriette! But now, we can also say: at Ekolo, we move forward too!

Bonana to everyone!
Happy New Year!

