

# Living with the bonobos

## Olivia's Diary

Near the remote village of Malebo, three days of driving on rough, bumpy roads, north of DRC's capital of Kinshasa, a young couple from Europe works on the protection of bonobos, living in the rainforest with their nine-month old baby.

On behalf of the Worldwide Fund for Nature WWF, project manager Olivia Haggis (34) from the UK and scientific coordinator Charles-Albert Petre (35) from Belgium, closely cooperate with local communities and with the local NGO Mbou Mon Tour (MMT). Charles-Albert focuses on research on bonobo behaviour. Findings in Malebo and elsewhere in DRC are the basis of measures to protect them. Olivia works on further development of sources of income that should raise the standard of living in the local communities and leave poverty behind. Community-based eco-tourism to see bonobos and scientific tourism are the main potential sources. Therefore, habituating bonobos to the presence of humans is important in Malebo. Olivia also works closely with other WWF projects in the area, such as the development of sustainable agriculture and agroforestry. In the spring of 2016 Olivia keeps a diary about the project. She tells about her daily life, far away from modern comforts and reflects on the co-existence of humans and bonobos. Her diary is a personal report about the road to a sustainable future for local communities.

### 15 MARCH 2016 - HEALTH OF THE BONOBOS

There are many advantages to habituating great apes, a good example being the successful increase in the population of mountain gorillas in Virunga National Park thanks to well-managed tourism. However, one of the major risks is disease transmission from humans (trackers, researchers, visitors) because great apes are so closely related to us. Worryingly, they can get infected with a human virus that just causes us to cough and sniff a bit, but can prove fatal for them. Obviously many precautions have been made to avoid this transmission happening, such as wearing masks, but our sites have an extra risk factor since they are so close to villages and local communities also use the same areas of forest as the bonobos. Last year one of our volunteers took a video of the group of bonobos playing in a pile of the remains of fresh leaves and stems that had been cut by local village women to weave mats earlier in the day, which also included the leaves that had been used to wrap their food which had been consumed at the same place. Imagine some of those women were ill, probably with sick children at home. The bonobos could then also become sick from playing in these remains.

Since the health of the bonobos is a top priority, we have a bonobo health monitor, Tonton. He comes from here and goes out with the bonobos each week day. His role is to observe the bonobos for signs of sickness and report to us as soon as any individual seems to be unwell. He collects observational data, but also routine faecal samples which are sent away for parasite and virus analysis. When a bonobo

Olivia Haggis with her nine-month old daughter Fleur and their two friends, red-tailed monkeys.





BONOBO (PAN PANISCUS) - PHOTO: F. GRETEUR



PHOTO: SINZIANA DEMIANI

Tracker Nzoy Lema Mole, taking notes.



PHOTO: SINZIANA DEMIANI

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shows signs of sickness, such as coughing, he collects more detailed observation data and as many other samples as possible. He regularly visits the camp to enter data and collect supplies, such as masks for the trackers. My heart always beats faster when Tonton appears on camp outside his normal schedule, because it usually means that bonobos are starting to show signs of sickness.

It is what happened today. Tonton came to inform us that three members of a bonobo group of fourteen in total had started coughing the day before. It was most likely nothing serious, but it is hard to know and the situation can quickly deteriorate. We were particularly anxious as around this time of year in the past two years we had experienced health outbreaks with the bonobos. The news of coughing bonobos reminded me of how utterly helpless I felt the year before during the bonobo health outbreak. At that time we had a particularly unfortunate scenario with a very sick mother who had a young baby on her, while her juvenile was playing next to them. It was the day before the vet arrived when we learnt that the mother had died. I went to the forest to help take some swabs to identify the cause of death.

Listening to my heart, I wanted to take the baby and juvenile, but my head knew that this was not the best option. With the cause of death unconfirmed, bringing the young bonobos to camp could pose a health risk to all staff members. We entered the forest early the next morning with the vet, by which time the baby had sadly died. The juvenile was staying close to his mother and the baby, only leaving for short periods before returning to sit with them. We worried that the group would leave and he would end up left behind and alone, but fortunately this did not happen. He started calling to the rest of the group, which eventually responded and by the end of the day he had re-joined them.

Fortunately, the number of coughing bonobos and the intensity of coughing did not increase this time. We were lucky, however there is still a chance that members of



the group may become sick, because the villagers in the surrounding communities usually have many coughing fits between March and May. What we really need, as with all habituation projects, is a ‘One Health’ approach, recognising the interconnection between the health of humans, animals and the forest ecosystem, and which also aims to reduce the disease burden in the local community. In the longer-term, we hope that the project can help to achieve this by using revenues from tourism to build a local hospital. In the meantime, the local communities also need sensitization programs to reduce disease transmission and access to regular health checks.

#### **5 APRIL 2016 - ZERO-POACHING AND BIOMONITORING WORKSHOP, LIMBE, CAMEROON**

During the past days I travelled from Malebo to the town of Limbe in Cameroon to participate in a Zero-poaching and Biomonitoring workshop which started a few days ago. It is a fantastic opportunity to participate in this international meeting under the umbrella of the Wildlife Crime Initiative of WWF and TRAFFIC. One of the topics is the development of a new biomonitoring system: a strong system to monitor numbers of wildlife can guide and optimize law enforcement activities.

The issues of poaching became very real when on the second day of the workshop they announced the very sad news that an eco-guard in Cameroon had been decapitated. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated issue. Many eco-guards are injured and even killed during their work. Although hunting is a threat for bonobos in DRC, we are lucky that the bonobos in our area have been protected, at least for the time being, by the ancient belief of the locals that they are their ancestors and therefore cannot be hunted and eaten. In our area the greatest threats to bonobos are habitat destruction and disease transmission from humans. WWF is trying to address these issues, for example through reforestation programmes and alternative livelihood initiatives such as ecotourism, in order to reduce the need of commercial bushmeat hunting.

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Another terrible blow came during the course of the workshop when the results of the census on the Eastern lowland gorilla population that is endemic to DRC were announced. The shocking finding was that the numbers were much lower than expected, showing a dramatic decline. There are many challenges to conservation and it can feel overwhelming at times. Sometimes it is difficult to stay positive. We have to celebrate the small victories and successes. That is part of why it is so important to have meetings like this. It was inspiring to see a group of people devoted to making even a small difference coming together to find the most effective way to work in unison to implement some positive changes.

In addition to the thought-provoking discussions, it was a nice break from the basic life we have at the camp and it was refreshing to have some luxuries such as hot running water, cold beer and a variety of food to choose from! There are many perks to the quiet and simplistic life at the camp, where the main noise is the sound of birds and insects (and the rooster when you are sleeping near the kitchen!), but it is always good to have a break from the camp to make you appreciate it more.

#### **16 APRIL 2016 - RETURN TO CAMP**

We were on our way back from Kinshasa to the camp in Malebo, and stayed one night in Nioki, a town north-east of Kinshasa on the Mfimi river in the Mai Ndombe province. The first part of the journey was easy, since it is just an hour’s flight between Kinshasa and Nioki.

However, the next leg was a bit more challenging. The day started bright and early in order to avoid arriving back at the camp too late, since the already long journey by car was extended because of the rainy season and travelling with our nine-month old little Fleur. What an adventure! We broke our record by travelling just over 12 hours! We set off around 6.30 a.m. with the African music blaring. We had a good first couple of hours, but then the heavy rain hit and the car got stuck, which happened frequently



PHOTO: CHARLES-ALBERT PETRE





Above: Stuck on the road from Nioki to Malebo. Below: She is just like a doll.



## During the ‘greeting’ bonobos have intercourse in all combinations, including same-sex genital rubbing with the females, adults with the young.

during the journey. While we were complaining about the weather and the staff were digging us out, some village boys were dancing naked in the rain and trying to play football with large smiles on their faces and it was funny to see the different reactions to the rain.

Due to the conditions of the road it was impossible to sleep, and just as you were to drift off you would go flying as the car slipped in the mud. After one particularly large hole in the road, we were literally thrown off the bench in the back and bumped our head on the roof of the car! Further delays were caused by a fallen tree that had to be cut into several pieces with the chainsaw and carried off the road, a flat tyre that had to be changed, and a small bridge that needed rebuilding. Luckily it had been spotted earlier, so supplies of planks of wood and nails were bought in Nioki before the return. We all had to regularly get out of the car for particularly bad sections of the road, and at one point the car very nearly tipped over.

We also had a few stops on the way for supplies, such as bananas and *chikwangue* (a cassava-based staple in the local diet, a rubbery ‘bread’ made from flour and wrapped up in a marantacea leaf). Each time the car stopped and the back doors opened, within a matter of seconds there would be at least 10 eager faces peering in. Some had expressions of excitement and others surprise. Having travelled a lot and always enjoyed getting off the beaten track a bit, it is refreshing to find that there are still places where locals are amazed by the sight of white people, and especially a white baby which they have never seen before. We always get the same reactions when we take Fleur with us to various villages in the area. Most children and adults are desperate to touch her and say that she looks like a doll.

### 25 APRIL 2016 - BONOBO VOLUNTEER

After a long delay due to visa issues with the UK embassy, a new long-term volunteer has finally arrived at the camp. She is keen and motivated to get started and see the bonobos. Ideally I had hoped that I could often go into the forest, but the realities of the work load and having a young

baby mean that my visits have become infrequent. I now have to soak up the experiences and stories of the others, such as Charles, the trackers, the volunteers and students. However, the enjoyment and pleasure that they get from seeing the bonobos is a huge motivation.

The volunteer recently told me that she had seen one of the mothers pushing her offspring on a ‘swing’ made from a vine. Trackers also reported sightings of bonobos hunting birds and small deer.

The first time seeing a bonobo in the wild is a touching and memorable experience. I had read many accounts about their peaceful nature, their ability to empathise and their unique conflict management techniques (solving potential aggressive situations through sex), but to witness this behaviour at first hand makes a deep impression. Another interesting feature is their social structure, in which females are dominant. The difference between them and chimps is evident in the first few seconds that you observe them. It is not to say that bonobos do not show some aggression, but they are much calmer than chimps. Even for a non-primatologist (which most visitors here are), seeing a wild bonobo in their natural habitat and being a part of their world, even for an hour, is an incredible and privileged experience.

Sitting in the peaceful forest, on a fallen log or patch of leaves, you are transported: waiting eagerly below their night nests for them to start stirring and coming out on the branches to feed, staring at the juveniles playing together, or the fascinating ‘greeting’ in which all combinations of individuals have intercourse, including same-sex genital rubbing with the females, adults with the young... but it only lasts a split second. Then they are off to find some more fruits to eat.

Walking in the forest is challenging work. There is often dense undergrowth with many marantacea leaves to battle your way through, fallen trees to squeeze under or climb over, rivers to wade through, not to mention the biting ants



Employing two people from the village as elephant trackers brought revenues to the community and helped to stop the elephants from being hunted.

and snakes to look out for! However, there is nothing more satisfying than coming back from the forest, covered in dirt and sweat with twigs in your hair, exhausted but buzzing from the close encounter with the bonobos and having a shower, even if it is with cold water from the river that still has some leaves and mud floating in it!

1 MAY 2016 - MONKEY BUSINESS

After a day at the camp we often like to go out for a walk with the dog. There are not many routes to choose, but the walk is always serene, normally either to the right to the airstrip where the occasional plane lands, or to the left, through the savannah and then on the road that passes through forested areas on either side. Charles, Fleur and I went out this afternoon with a new student who had just arrived at the camp (after three days of travel by car to the base from Kinshasa, we thought she might want to stretch her legs!). On the way we met a man on his bike. It was only when he stopped next to us that we saw the four dead red-tailed monkeys tied up on the back. Although we collect data on hunting in the area at our road barrier and know that around 30 monkeys are hunted each month, it was still a shock to see them, especially as you rarely even hear monkeys when you go into the forest. In fact, it is only actually the bonobos that you ever see, as all the other species, such as deer, have been excessively hunted.

Seeing the dead monkeys was even sadder, given the fact that we had three rescued monkeys of the same species at the camp, which we had cared for as very young babies when their mothers had been killed for bushmeat (two last year and one earlier this year). We knew they still had some growing to do, but seeing the size of the adults made us realise that the older two would at least double in size. Given that they are already capable of causing chaos at the camp, we had to confirm the next steps for them. Originally we hoped that we could release them back into the forest once they had grown a bit, but it soon became apparent that they were too habituated to humans and that they depended on us. Moreover, as illustrated by our encounter,

hunting in the area is a major problem and so we had to be sure that they would not be released only to be killed. Another issue is disease transmission, as they have spent time in such close proximity with us. One solution is to send them to a sanctuary in the east of the country. However, as they are almost fully grown and it is likely that each year there will be more rescued babies needing a home, it seems preferable to invest in a release programme in a nearby part of the forest. The idea would be to work with the local communities to ensure it is protected, as the management of these forests are community-based. As the village chiefs are well-respected here, it would be possible to enforce this with their support. We could build a large cage in the forest and pay a local worker to feed the monkeys each day. After calling in vets to confirm that the animals are healthy, we could start opening the cage each day and letting them out. Eventually they would no longer come back to the cage area for food. The ideal would then be to withdraw in a natural way, or reintroduce other species that could breed in the safety of the protected forest and then spread out to other parts of the forest.

We can generate some additional jobs by paying a few local villagers to act as eco-guards, who could monitor that people are not hunting in the selected part of the forest. Parallel to this, we can sensitize the local populations about sustainable ways in which to hunt in the area. Hopefully future tourists will enjoy visiting this area of forest with many animals, which will act as an incentive to maintain and protect it.

7 MAY 2016 - TRIP TO MBANZI

Today was quite eventful. With the new volunteer and a new student at the camp, we decided to mix business and pleasure and have a trip to the ‘nearby’ village of Mbanzi. It is about 20 km from the camp, however given the road conditions and the fact that it is the rainy season, it can take more than an hour to get there... in some cases even longer! As I spend a lot of time at the camp and on the computer,



Below: Malebo, kitchen WWF.



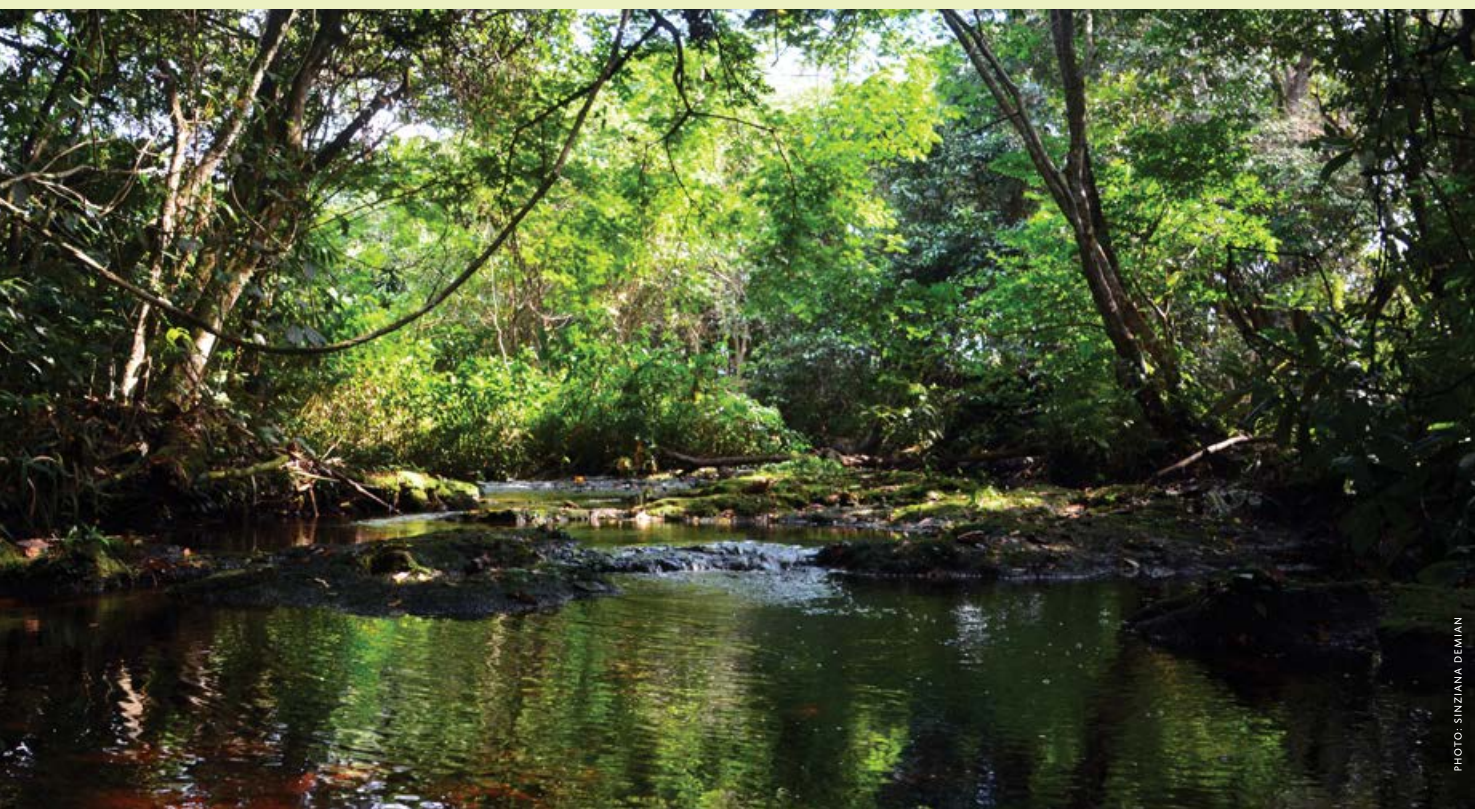
Below: Malebo. Meeting with trackers at the office of WWF.







Above: Malebo. Bungalows for tourists. Below: Bambu river.



I leapt at the excuse to have a little road trip. I feel that it is important for our project, and WWF in general, to maintain a certain presence in the village to help the villagers to feel motivated to protect the elephants which spend time in the forest near the village (and also come into the village) during the season. Our project employed two people from the village as elephant trackers until the end of 2015, when it was decided to rethink how the elephants could best be protected in the area. Although their work did not directly offer much to the development of a long-term protection strategy, it brought revenues to the community linked to the elephants and helped to stop the elephants from being hunted, despite the destruction they caused to the crops and even houses of the villagers. We had a tricky situation when a resident came to us to ask for compensation, because ‘our’ elephants had taken the roof off his house and destroyed many belongings!

Even if we cannot offer much, we need to make sure that the gains for the community are sufficient to balance the negative aspects of the presence of elephants. We also have to maintain a good relationship for the sake of the bonobos in the area. The village is on the border of a large section of forest which is of particular interest, because a recent camera trap study with which we helped showed the presence of both elephants and bonobos, which is uncommon in the fragmented forests around. Thanks to our connections with the community, one of our trackers came to inform us that a live adult bonobo had been caught last year and brought into the village. We were able to get a member of the police and go to talk with the hunter. At first he was trying to sell it, but fortunately when he saw the police he knew the potential consequences and agreed to let us take the bonobo and release it. Although this was very stressful for the bonobo, it was such a great outcome that we were able to release it soon after its capture in the same part of the forest where it had been found. Since we do not work with this group of bonobos, we can only hope that it managed to find the rest of the group. It was a fun visit and we saw the old trackers and other

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members of the village and bought some beignets (which are similar to small deep-fried dough balls) for a snack. After wandering around the village, we saw the rain coming and we all huddled into the small front room of one of the houses. With the rain pouring outside, we sat squeezed around the table with local music playing from someone’s phone, taking turns to take small sips of the local ‘wine’ (made from cassava) and chatting and dancing.

In order to avoid being back in the camp too late, and given the condition of the road and the weather, we set off soon after 7.00 p.m. Unfortunately, after about 30 minutes we were stuck in the mud, and attempts to get out just got us deeper into the mud. In the end it was impossible to open the door on the driver’s side, while the window was on ground level! Needless to say, we had to send for help to pull us out. We ended up all sleeping in the car, because the two persons who had walked back to the village to get a bike and cycle to the camp to get a second car to tow us did not arrive until around 7.00 a.m.!

#### 27 MAY 2016 - TOURISM REPORT

Today I started reading and commenting on the final draft of the ecotourism report and business plan for the Malebo area. Since the project started in 2005, the objectives have involved habituating a couple of groups of bonobos to human presence to allow the development of tourism in the area (in addition to developing scientific research). In general it is a good site for habituation, because the forest-savannah mosaic allows easy access into different sections of the forest and the local taboo to hunt bonobos makes them less fearful of humans. However, the habituation process has been slow due to frequent changes in project leaders over the years and a lack of constant presence in the field. It is great that we have now reached a point where the bonobos are habituated enough to human presence to launch tourism and to start collecting data on



their behaviour. In late 2015 we called in an ecotourism consultancy to help us develop a business plan and a consultant visited the site in February. We have now received the final draft of the report.

It is really encouraging that they feel tourism here is feasible and they offered some concrete steps that we could take next. We currently have a basic set up for tourists with five bungalows at the WWF base. There is also the option to stay at the farm of our local collaborator NGO Mbou Mon Tour (MMT). MMT also has a boat that can be taken between Kinshasa and the town of Tshumbiri on the Congo river, which is then about three hours by car to the base. We are thinking of building an area at the camp by the river for tourists to relax. At present we are cutting a grid system of paths in the forest to make it easier for visitors and researchers to walk to find the bonobos. A major challenging and limiting factor is the transport aspect, since the options are either very easy but also very expensive (you can hire a plane and take a direct flight from Kinshasa to the airstrip just a few km from camp in 50 minutes) or more reasonably priced but rough and time consuming (for example, 12 hours in the car coming via Nioki). This is where a good road system would be ideal. As there are regular commercial flights between Kinshasa and Nioki, which is only 270 km away, it would only take a few hours to travel by car with well-maintained roads.

#### 7 JUNE 2016 - HANDOVER TO MBOU MON TOUR

Since starting the project, we have been trying to improve and develop our relationship with our local collaborator NGO MMT, based at a farm about 20 km from the WWF base. We already had an agreement with them, but we are now in the final stages of signing an amendment to this agreement. The idea is to harmonise the work that WWF and MMT are doing with the habituated bonobos in Nkala and Mpelu, but also at their site in Manzano, and together develop a strong health monitoring programme for all bonobo groups and gradually hand over more and more responsibility to MMT for the groups that are presently

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managed by WWF. Today we had a meeting with the locally based manager to discuss in detail the Terms of Reference for his new role as the supervisor of one of the teams of trackers. It went really well and it is such a relief to have a reliable, friendly and motivated Congolese person to work with. We then had a meeting with all the trackers of Nkala to inform them about these changes and address their questions. Fortunately, they are really happy about the proposed changes and pleased to have someone based close by to deal with everyday issues. We plan to help develop the farm, for example by giving them some solar panels to allow them to have power.

We will also work closely with MMT in the development of a tourism business plan. They are close with the local communities and can help us to have a good relationship with them, which is obviously crucial for tourism in the area to be successful. WWF is an international NGO. By empowering a local NGO such as MMT and handing over responsibility to them, sustainability will be embedded deeper into local society. So we are very happy about the direction things are going now.

The communities are very supportive of our presence, but are frustrated that we have been talking about tourism for many years and yet they feel they have not seen any benefits from this yet. Thankfully we are now at the point where we have visitors coming and also a film crew, who have donated money to the villages to view the bonobos, so they are starting to see some revenues from this, which is a motivation to protect the bonobos and their environment, although they are still small at the moment.



Above: meeting with the team of local NGO Mbou Mon Tour (MMT). From left to right: Marc Bonkoto, Jean-Christophe Bokika Ngawolo (president MMT), Wells Mto, Olivia Haggis and scientific coordinator Charles-Albert Petre.



Chief of the village of Nkala, Gilbert Mame Ngono.



Children in the village of Nkala.





Aerial view on the flight from Kinshasa to Malebo showing the forest-savannah mosaic. The river is a tributary of the Congo river.

PHOTO: SINZIANA DEMIAN



**11 JUNE 2016 - FLEUR**

This morning, while sitting outside in our garden area in the shade of a tree breast-feeding Fleur, I was thinking about what it would be like for her to grow up here in the long term. Her life is already so different compared to both our friends’ children growing up back in Europe, but also to the other local children. Although it is remote and far from medical care, there are many wonderful aspects of life here for her. Each day she spends most of the time outdoors in the fresh air with no pollution from busy traffic, she can paddle in the river that runs along the bottom of camp, she is surrounded by the local staff that adore her and shower her with attention and she has a plenty of wildlife to play with. Bath time is spent splashing in a large basin of water outside, while laughing at the rescued monkeys trying to steal her bath toys!

Sometimes it feels very basic here for her, but seeing the children in the local villages makes me appreciate how privileged she is. She may have many of the perks that they experience, but the advantage of a relatively good diet and medical treatment to which they do not have access. Who knows what the future will hold, but for now we are making the most of being in the lucky position to be able to spend so much time with her, while still working and seeing all the small changes that occur on a daily basis.



House of Olivia Haggis and Charles-Albert Petre.





## THE FATE OF GREAT APES IN CENTRAL AFRICA

by Meindert Brouwer

The forests of Central Africa are the home of four of the world's five great apes: the western gorilla, the eastern gorilla, the chimpanzee and the bonobo, the latter occurring in one country only: Democratic Republic of Congo. The fifth great ape is the orang utan in Southeast Asia. The numbers of African great apes have declined dramatically over the last decades, due to deforestation, fragmentation of habitat, commercial bushmeat hunting and, at times, Ebola. Political instability and armed conflicts in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo have added to the illegal hunting in that region and has made protection difficult.

Human pressure on the habitats of great apes in Central Africa continues to be serious, since human population in Central Africa is growing fast, especially in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and economic activities are expanding. The conversion of forests into agriculture is inevitable.

Therefore, smart land use planning, in which important great ape habitats are protected is key to the survival of gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos. A shift from unsustainable exploitation of forest areas to sustainable use is also very important to retain healthy habitats for the great apes. FSC-certified forest management is a good and effective way to keep the forests. You can read about this in chapter 5 'Keeping forests and bettering lives'.

In general, poverty is a major problem for conservation in Central Africa. Commercial bushmeat hunting and illegal logging by poor people are understandable when there are no alternatives.

So, the development of new sources of income for local communities is an important part of conservation strategy in Central Africa. The creation of new jobs in sustainable forest management, through community-based ecotourism and recruiting and paying local ecoguards pull people out of poverty. Olivia Haggis and her colleagues are working on new sources of income, as Olivia's diary shows. In many areas in Central Africa the enforcement of national laws and international treaties is weak. This can make protection of wildlife very difficult.

### Bonobo numbers

Bonobos occur in central DRC, south of the Congo River, in grassland-forest mosaics, lowland forests and swamp forest habitats. Distribution in these areas is very patchy, and considering the scarcity of recent surveys in most of these areas, the estimates regarding the total population size between 29,500 (Myers Thompson 1997) and 50,000 (Dupain and Van Elsacker 2001) should be considered with the greatest caution (Fruth et al. 2008).

Source: WWF African Great Apes Action Plan 2011 - 2017.

