

Sally Jewell Coxe and Michael Hurley Mama and Papa Bonobo

INTERVIEW BY JUSTIN KAVANAGH

Picture a great ape, deep in a Congo rainforest, pondering her future. For the bonobo (*Pan paniscus*), the peaceable, female-dominated branch of the ape family tree, the problem is homo sapiens. Since the early 1990s, her treetop tranquility has been ruffled by armies on the move below; her flesh is in demand on the bushmeat market; and now the growl of chainsaws brings a daily scramble for alternative accommodation. So much for evolution.

In a country vexed by war, mass rape, and AIDS, the case for bonobo conservation is a hard sell. Yet since Sally Jewell Coxe and Michael Hurley answered the call, the bonobo has found tireless champions in Congolese villages, in Kinshasa’s corridors of power, and in their home base of Washington, D.C. They have galvanized the Congolese to protect bonobos and are known locally as Mama and Papa Bonobo.

Sally Coxe became enchanted by mankind’s closest relatives when working at the National Geographic Society. She later founded the Bonobo Conservation Initiative, dedicated to the protection of the lesser-known ape and its Democratic Republic of Congo habitat. Working with a network of local and international partners, BCI scored a major coup recently when the DRC government established the Sankuru Nature Reserve, the first part of a planned Bonobo Peace Forest (see map). Sankuru’s 30,570 km² encompass an area the size of Belgium.

BCI has confounded classic conservation models by basing decisions on indigenous knowledge and using local social structures to spread awareness. Their indigenous conservation (IKCON) approach gives communities a long-term stake in the forests by providing health facilities, education programs, and alternative employment opportunities in areas threatened by logging concerns and commercial hunters. “The race for the rainforests is on,” says Director Michael Hurley. “The hunters and loggers have many advantages. But if we get the people on the side of the bonobos, we believe their future can be secured. We’ve a saying in Lingala: *Salisa bonobo mpe bonobo bakosalisa yo*: Help the bonobos and the bonobos will help you.”



Sally Coxe and Michael Hurley of the Bonobo Conservation Initiative work with partners like Centre de Recherche en Ecologie et For-esterie (CREF) to combat commercial hunting and logging in the Congolese rainforests. Baby Mabali (above), an orphan rescued when hunters killed his mother for bushmeat, is now cared for at a sanctuary in Kinshasa.

If you would like to learn more about the bonobo and how you can help, visit the Bonobo Conservation Initiative online at: www.bonobo.org

Established in 2007, the Sankuru Nature Reserve encompasses an area larger than Belgium. The reserve anchors the proposed Bonobo Peace Forest, a linked constellation of community-managed reserves.



Sally, how did you first fall for bonobos? You started out at National Geographic?

Sally Jewell Coxe: Yes, I was a copywriter at the Society, and I'd always been passionate about conservation. I begged to write the promotion for the book *The Great Apes: Between Two Worlds* and became absolutely captivated. The photographer Nick Nichols was the driving force

and a real inspiration, and I read the works of Dian Fossey and Jane Goodall.

Like most people, I'd never heard of bonobos, so to find this ape that was female empowered, highly sexual, and that didn't wage wars intrigued me. I have a degree in psychology, and all my interests coalesced. ... if there's such a thing as fate, this was it. I call it my life explosion: I quit my job and freelanced to support my bonobo habit!

Through the Society, I met or interviewed several experts like George Schaller, and, serendipitously, Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, a pioneer in great ape language studies. She came to National Geographic at that time, and after I left the Society, I volunteered to work with her at the lab at Georgia State University. At that time Kanzi and Panbanisha, the bonobos who use human language, lived there.

How was your first encounter? What was it about bonobos that so charmed you?

I hit it off instantly with the bonobos. We would go for walks in the forest. Sometimes I'd carry Panbanisha on my back. She was just a youngster then—now she's got two kids of her own. To get to know them on a personal basis was fascinating, exhilarating—and humbling. We'd play hide-and-seek with Panbanisha. They are very much like people: very, very intelligent, and super-sensitive to human body language.

How did they compare with the chimpanzees at the lab?

The difference in dispositions was marked. Chimps are by nature more aggressive. Bonobos really do "make love not war." They also smell wonderful—very different from chimps. They have this sweet smell, almost like a faint perfume. Maybe they charm us with their pheromones!

You look in their eyes and you see not only intelligence, but also a deep consciousness and compassion. As we know, they have sex often and in every way. But they also have squabbles and fights—they're no angels. But they don't wage territorial wars like chimps. They're also extremely social. When bonobo groups meet in the forest, it's been observed that they've shared food and had a group ... you know... "celebration."



Local ecoguards at Kokolopori observe wild bonobos. BCI has trained, equipped, and currently supports more than 100 monitors who also act as ambassadors for conservation. The Initiative seeks to germinate economic opportunities for villagers within the bonobos' habitat. Educational, medical, and community programs aim to foster future generations of rainforest stewards.

How do they differ in captivity, Michael? Is it more useful to study them in the wild, in a more relaxed and nurturing environment?

Michael Hurley: They *are* different in captivity. They're more sensitive than chimps. Frans de Waal writes that during World War II, some bonobos died of stress during air raids in Germany. Some in zoos pull their hair out; actually they become more like humans. There's a similar human affliction called trichotillomania.

They're obviously averse to war, and they're very matriarchal. So it's important to keep them alive in the wild where we can observe all these aspects. Bonobos have been a recognized

species only since 1933 and they've only been studied in the wild intermittently since the mid-1970s, so we're still learning.

The natural habitat of the bonobos is one of the most remote and inaccessible rainforests on Earth—an obvious target for both hunters and logging interests. Can you describe the region topographically and politically?

Hurley: The bonobos inhabit the area south of the Congo River and north of the Kasai River, some of the last unexplored rainforest on Earth—extremely difficult to access. Where our teams work in the Lac Tumba region is the largest swamp forest in Africa. The bonobo evolved here by the standard speciation mechanism of being isolated from chimps and gorillas within these geographic confines. They generally live in the tropical rainforest, but also venture into the savanna for certain plants.

They have an amazing mnemonic map of the forest flora and they know when trees are fruiting. We have a list of over 120 types of foods they eat. So they're a very important “umbrella” species, as they play a vital role in dispersing a vast variety of seeds, which regenerates the forest. Hence protecting the bonobo also conserves the rainforest. In terms of predators, the bonobos are only in danger from humans—and possibly an occasional leopard.

Coxe: From 1996 on, the Congo has suffered back-to-back wars. Laurent Kabila came and ousted Mobutu. Then foreign armies of occupation invaded from Uganda and Rwanda. Subsequently, the African “World War” erupted, with, at one point, nine countries involved. When I went back to Wamba in 2002 through support from National Geographic Expeditions, the Japanese research camp was occupied by FAC soldiers, but through our contacts in Kinshasa, President Joseph Kabila gave us a high-level soldier as a bodyguard. It's vital to have good relationships on the ground. We've built a strong network from the grassroots all the way up to the top levels of the DRC government.

In the bonobo habitat, there was a lot of killing, rape, and spreading of AIDS; terrible damage was done as armies passed



Estimates of wild populations swing from 10,000 to 40,000.

BCI conducts surveys while creating reserves for the wide-ranging ape, whose habitat is veined with tributaries of the Congo River. Stewardship programs promote natural resource management, aimed at safeguarding large tracts of the globally significant Congo Basin watershed.

through, stripping everything down like ants. When we went to Wamba, you could tell the people were terrorized. Old friends were afraid to talk. They looked like they had just shrunk.

Hurley: One of Sally's friends, Nkoi, (which means leopard) is a great tracker and a real hero. Soldiers would coerce people into hunting bonobo for meat. Back in Mobutu's time, he would give visiting dignitaries gifts of rhino or bonobo, and this one time Nkoi got between the soldiers and the bonobos and said "You're going to have to kill me first."

Nkoi is typical of the kind of leader who we try to work with. The kind of person who inspires—and deserves—respect, when he—or she—brings ideas shared with BCI to the people.

What are the aims of the Bonobo Conservation Initiative?

Coxe: We're dedicated to ensuring the survival of the bonobo and its habitat; the two main threats are hunting and logging. The bonobo habitat now has more concessions for logging than any other part of the Congo, because it harbors the largest, least exploited forest. Ironically, the war and lack of infrastructure had kept the loggers out; now, with peace, the logging companies are on the Congo like flies: the Europeans, Malaysians, Lebanese, and the Chinese are on their way. Often, loggers come in with bags of salt, beer, sugar, some money for the chief, and trade it for the forest. Under the new Forest Code they have to obtain rights and provide substantial benefits to the local people. We've taken the lead to get the code translated into Lingala, so that the people of the forest are aware of their rights, and their options. But sometimes all it takes is a few bags of salt and 50 or 60 bucks, and a million-dollar forest is gone forever.

There is also little enforcement. The Forest Code should make the logging more controlled, but like the law against hunting endangered species, how can it be enforced in such a huge, remote area, unless it is actively monitored by local communities?

Hurley: We're up against the clock. The villagers want to protect their forest but they need our help now, because the loggers aren't waiting. Logging offers a living, but for how long? We have visited a concession area where the forest is gone, and the village is now a shanty town. We urgently need to provide alternative livelihoods in these regions before more damage is done. People are so devastated from the war that there is no access to services, no way to make a living, no education, nothing. This is a region where the U.N. has declared the worst humanitarian crisis on Earth in terms of lack of healthcare, child mortality rate, disease rate, and poverty. One of the few



Mongandu women paint their faces red to ritually celebrate a first-born child. But the future looks anything but rosy. “People are so devastated from the war that there is no access to services, no way to make a living, no education, nothing,” says Michael Hurley.

ways to make a living is by hunting bush meat commercially. So we also need to give hunters alternative options.

BCI’s IKCON idea is a somewhat radical approach to conservation. How does it work?

Hurley: Put simply, we trust in the wisdom of the indigenous Congolese. We believe that the best way to help the bonobo is to help and engage the people who live around them. We help them develop cooperative conservation and community development programs; we help improve education, health, and employment prospects so that they will become the

guardians of the forests. But first we listen to what communities tell us, we listen to their needs, traditions, and customs, rather than conducting long and costly studies, and imposing programs written in Washington or New York.

The IKCON methodology was developed by BCI through careful study and experience of how to effect truly sustainable conservation in this particular context. My background in ethnobotany has also contributed to this approach. The normal academic approach to finding, say, curative properties within plants involves random screenings, which involves exhaustive samplings of millions of plant screenings at a significant cost. Now the ethnobotanical approach draws directly on local wisdom: you ask the shaman about the properties of the sap of a certain tree, and most likely, he’ll also tell you about 20 other properties in that tree. Likewise, BCI draws on the local knowledge of the forests to pinpoint bonobo populations, migration patterns, feeding habits, etc.

We don’t shun the standard approach of conducting a forest-wide survey, which is necessary in the long term. But unfortunately that takes time and money. If you start there, you’ll learn where the bonobos *might be*—or *might have been*, as many could die or move on in the course of your survey. And in the meantime no protection takes place.

So our methods combine biological and social science. This first step we call surveys and information exchange.

So step two is to stop the locals hunting?

Hurley: There’s a difference between sustainable hunting and commercial bush meat hunting and that’s what people confuse. This is another example of IKCON at work. Indigenous people everywhere have been remarkably diligent stewards of the rainforests. Many of the largest, most intact forests with the greatest diversity of species, are places where indigenous people hunt. Why is this? Because they have systems in place which have evolved with the forests. They use knowledge and age-old wisdom. They will rotate areas of forest, or rotate species. If they kill all the animals, their children won’t eat.



With infrastructure devastated throughout the DRC, smoked bushmeat is among the few commodities not to spoil on the arduous journey to market. Although outlawed in protected areas, commercial hunting remains a serious threat to all wildlife in the Congo Basin. Effective policing of the vast rainforests depends on the willing vigilance of local communities.

We work around these indigenous systems. In our areas, the systems vary: In Kokolopori the Mongandu people have taboos against hunting bonobos, while in the Ikela territory, beliefs are mixed: some hunt, some don't. Then further south people grind the bones and use them in rituals to increase fertility. Indigenous groups also designate sacred forests. There is a sacred swamp where spirits are said to prohibit fishing. But this is also a breeding ground, so it makes perfect sense in terms of sustainability. It's a combination of science and spirituality; both symbiotic relationship and

spiritual bond to the landscape. This is how cultures evolve with nature, and we should respect them.

Coxe: One of our first interventions, and one of our most successful has been introducing disease-resistant cassava, which is the staple crop. It had been devastated by a horrible mosaic virus. People were malnourished. Working with agricultural partners, we brought in improved cuttings, trained local agronomists, and helped people replicate this strain. It took off like wildfire. The new cassava produces huge roots, and the leaves are made into pondou, which is like a super-spinach, full of protein. The new cassava generates income, and increases yield by about 400%, thus reducing the impact on the forest. Beyond that, we've initiated microcredit programs and invested in training and infrastructure to create new economic opportunities and alternatives to the bushmeat trade.

Hurley: But it's not just a quid quo pro: you protect the rainforests, we'll help you eat. IKCON is a shared venture in preservation. We ask what resources do we have to work together. We say "well if you guys are going to be the stewards of the land, you have to eat, and your children can't die of disease." And we can't expect the forest to be protected without educating people to manage natural resources. Believe me—Africans don't just ask for money or handouts. What they want is education and opportunity. My first time in Mompano, I almost cried: I was surrounded by little kids shouting "Bic, Bic, *stylo*," They didn't want money, or candy, from the mondele (white man), they wanted a pen to write, they wanted education. They were begging for a future.

So this principle works by helping communities take the first small steps to help themselves?

Coxe: Yes, it's all about partnership—and locally-based leadership. We are a young organization so we don't have huge resources at this point, but we help Congolese partners, and coordinate with international partners, to build village conservation centers which act as community meeting places, and we help establish schools, and clinics, such as the one just built in Kokolopori. An international organization has provided



Darkness in the heartland? Joseph Conrad compared his Congo voyage to “...travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the Earth and the big trees were kings.” Today, as logging companies scramble for concessions, the DRC government must weigh protection of the bonobo habitat as part of its pledge to reduce global warming. The rainforests’ flagship species face an uncertain future.

discounted medicines, and the clinic is now operational with a fantastic local doctor and three nurses.

IKCON seeks to integrate indigenous cultural customs and beliefs with the aims of preservation. How does this principle work in practice?

Coxe: The talking drums are a good example of how IKCON can work. Every village has a huge wooden drum, which is placed at a central mound. Any news, any gathering, any death is announced through a tonal tribal language, which they use in both drum and whistle form.

They send their message, which is picked up in the next village by the drummer on duty that day, and it’s passed along to the next village, and so on. It’s amazingly fast and accurate. Michael once found out through the talking drum that Albert had a flat tire in Yotemankele, and would be late for a meeting. It’s that specific. Now we also install HF radios, which villages want, to help with forestry protection and communication over longer distances, but it also makes sense to use this ready-made communication system and to simultaneously preserve the culture.

Congolese culture is vibrant and vast, but to draw on it you must respect that culture and not disturb it. A good example was in Kokolopori where the women opposed a proposal for a new well in their village. We wanted to use microcredit funds to best serve the women: and we thought, it’s obvious, sink a well and save them a difficult daily walk of several kilometers carrying water from a faraway source. But it turned out that the women considered those walks as precious time together to talk about their men folk. Which proves it’s not always wise to impose our ideas, despite the best intentions.

Part of your policy is to change the way that the Congolese see the bonobo. For example, you said that certain tribes use the bonobo’s bones and ashes for fertility rituals. In the country where the scramble for Africa reached its nadir, how do you change attitudes without appearing to be culturally imperialistic?

Coxe: We do this by not being the ones delivering the message. The white man, the *mondele*, for once, is showing Congolese leaders the respect of mutual trust, and of ultimately letting them propose these principles and plans to their people. So it’s the Congolese who are convincing their brothers and sisters that the bonobos are a lot more valuable alive than dead. *They* are saying “you don’t need them for that ritual,” not us. And they are the best messengers. Our role is to provide the financial and practical back-up, to help them achieve these changes. We share ideas and work as a team.

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Hurley: In terms of education, we also have to deliver the message in a way the Congolese relate to culturally, be that through story, song or whatever. We’ve enlisted the help of World Music star, Papa Wemba, who is from Sankuru to deliver the preservation message through a song and radio spots about bonobos. He is the perfect messenger. We must learn to see the issue of conservation through African rather than Western eyes.

Is it difficult to gain the trust of the Congolese, given their history with the mondele?

Coxe: The real key has been the local Congolese leaders. So in places like Kokolopori and Sankuru, the people are empowered. It gives them hope and respect and that is essential. These people have been through hell for over a century. They were enslaved by the Belgians. Then they suffered the dictatorship of Mobutu, and the wars and exploitation that followed. So when they see that our attitude is to devolve power into their hands, when we seek their help, and do it through their leaders, this makes a difference. This is the key to our success at Kokolopori, Sankuru, and other Peace Forest sites. We’ve been very fortunate to find inspired and capable local conservation leaders.

The Bonobo Peace Forest seems a hugely ambitious plan—how much of the rainforest exactly does the final projection encompass?

Hurley: In the case of the Sankuru Nature Reserve the ICCN—the DRC park authority—actually expanded our initially projected areas to include a critical watershed and to engage more of the community, so we listened to them. Sankuru is 30,570 square kilometers. As currently envisioned, the entire Peace Forest will include Lilungu, Kololopori, Lonua, Lingomo, Mompano, Samba and Monieka (see map). All these will be linked: the bonobo population is fragmented so it’s vital to link the community-based reserves with biological corridors. This could be over 50,000 square kilometers in all. The idea started in 2002 with a study supported by Conservation International’s Global Conservation Fund. In consultations, we discovered that people didn’t want another national park because there were people living in the habitat. The forest was their home. So we evolved towards community-based reserves with linking corridors—a model now being recognized as more practicable and more sustainable. Already with Sankuru, we’ve achieved the world’s largest continuous protected area for any great ape.

What is the political significance of this recent decision by the government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to create the Sankuru Nature Reserve?

Coxe: The success of the Sankuru Reserve and the entire Bonobo Peace Forest concept originally stemmed from what was supposed to be a 10-minute appointment with President Kabila in 2002, which ended up lasting for two hours. It turned

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out that the president loves apes—he had a pet chimpanzee. The DRC government embraced the idea of an initiative driven by local people. Since then, the government has also been keen to honor its responsibility to mitigate global warming by preservation. So in their rainforest home the bonobos are well placed to be icons of peace and the DRC’s green credentials.

The scientist Gottfried Hohmann has said that in 100 years the forest will be gone, that now is our last chance to study bonobos. Can you offer an alternative vision?

Hurley: We can, but to do that we need support. Our focus is to protect the bonobo in the wild; Gottfried Hohmann is a scientist, and a scientist’s role is primarily to observe rather than protect. Our aim is to coordinate these roles, to make the science work alongside the conservation, which is driven by people on the ground.

The U.N. has estimated that in 20 years only 4% of the bonobo habitat could be left. So we’re in a desperate race against time. Logging threatens the bonobos and it accelerates global warming. The money needed to help local people save their rainforests is minimal, but the world now really needs to put its money where its mouth is.

The choice for these people is very real: they get help to establish long-term programs, or the logging companies simply buy them off. The loggers can offer the Congolese cake right now, but we can offer seeds to sow a future. But every month that goes by we lose more of the forest. A little bit of seed funding goes a long way, but they need it *now!* Our main concern now is that we have many similar communities who want to participate in our programs, but we need money to help them get started. We stay awake at night worrying about funding.

Finally, why is it so important for man to study bonobos now?

Coxe: Since chimps have been so well studied, mankind has tended to justify our own bellicosity by comparing us with them. But we share the same amount of DNA (about 98.6%) with the peaceful, laid-back bonobo. They offer us the chance to study different aspects of ourselves, to compare bonobos and chimps as the Yin and Yang of human nature, the male and female paradigm.

It’s also interesting that bonobos are only coming to light now. Look what’s happening on our planet: if at any time in humankind’s cultural evolution we could learn from a peace-loving, non-destructive, non-territorial, side of our ancestry, it is surely the present. Otherwise, I fear, we will simply kill ourselves off. The bonobos are linked inextricably to us for many reasons, not the least of which is where they live. We are choking the Earth, but if we can save the bonobo, we can also save the second lung of the planet. Bonobos inhabit the last bastion of the Congo rainforest, and they are the perfect flagship species for it.



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