
Bonobo - *Pan paniscus* (8/1/98)

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BONOBO

Pan paniscus

Description: The bonobo is a species of chimpanzee. It is the least known of the great apes because it lives in a remote rainforest region of central Africa, and was only identified as a species in 1933. The bonobo is also commonly referred to as the pygmy chimpanzee. Pygmy is a misnomer because the body weight of the bonobo is, on average, the same or only slightly less than of the subspecies of the common chimpanzee, *Pan troglodytes schweinfurthii*. Compared to the common chimpanzee, the body weight of the bonobo is differently proportioned, and the center of gravity is shifted lower - making it possible for the bonobo to stand more erect and frequently walk bipedally. Bonobos have longer limbs (relative to trunk length) and their build is generally more slender and gracile. The body structure of the bonobo is an adaptation for climbing and living an arboreal lifestyle in the rainforest. The head and ears of bonobos are noticeably smaller, and there is less brow mass over the eyes than observed in chimpanzees. The facial skin is darkly pigmented, and the hair is black, usually parted in the middle of the head with bushy sideburns sticking out on both sides of the face. The bonobo's vocalizations are high-pitched squeals. Because of the similar morphological traits, some anthropologists consider the bonobo to be the best living prototype for the common ancestor of humans and African apes. While this controversy is unresolved, it has been established through molecular genetic analyses that the chimpanzee genus, *Pan*, is most closely related to humans and shares approximately 98% genetic identity. Thus it follows that the bonobos and chimpanzees have many human-like morphological, physiological and behavioral traits.

Range: Bonobos are geographically confined to a small region in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in the Congo River Basin south of the Congo River.

Habitat: Unlike the common chimpanzee, which lives in a variety of habitats, the bonobo is found primarily in lowland rainforests. Its lifestyle is more arboreal.

Diet: Bonobos primarily feed on arboreal fruits, leaves and pith from stems. They are known to occasionally eat insects and hunt small mammals. They have also been observed to slap water up from a stream and eat either invertebrates or fish.

Social Organization: Certain aspects of bonobo social organization differ from the chimpanzee's and other great apes'. Bonobos are most frequently found in mixed age and sex groups with adults, juveniles and infants of both sexes freely associating with each other. There is a less pronounced dominance hierarchy in the bonobo's social structure, and, unique among great apes, a greater prevalence of strong female-female bonding (as opposed to male-male bonding observed in common chimps). Bonobos are highly social. They have developed a set of ritualized socio-sexual behaviors which are specific to their species. Sexual behaviors have evolved to function as social forces, and sexual behaviors are displayed by individuals of all ages. For example, copulations are common between male and female adults when the female is not in estrus, there is a higher frequency of homosexual behavior among bonobos of all ages (especially among adult females), and genital contact functions as social appeasement during times of group tension. One special feature observed in bonobo society is the general lack of intraspecific aggression. Bonobos are less apt to engage in physical conflicts and intergroup confrontations. They are generally peaceful. This is attributed to maintenance of their highly complex social repertoire. Bonobos mature at about seven to ten years in captivity, and at about twelve to fourteen years in the wild. Captive females give birth to one infant approximately every five years, and gestation lasts about eight months. While the infant is dependent on its mother for its first four years of life, its father and siblings are strongly associated family members.

Conservation Status: The bonobo is listed as an endangered species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, a vulnerable species by the IUCN Red Data Book and as an Appendix I species by CITES. There are no good estimates of the number of bonobos remaining in the wild. Surveys are desperately needed. What is known is that bonobos no longer occur in much of their historical range, and that the wild populations have been greatly reduced by deforestation and human encroachment. The populations are discontinuous and widely scattered.

Threats to Survival: The bonobo is threatened by forest destruction for forest products and agriculture. Bonobos are hunted for food and for sale to the pet trade. Most recent reports from field researchers indicate increased poaching of bonobos for food. This increase is attributable to nationwide food shortages and an influx of weapons and refugees from regional conflicts. One of the major threats to this species is that its range lies entirely within the country of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo). Even historically the bonobo is considered to be a rare species relative to other apes because of its small range and habitat limitations. Thus the species is extremely vulnerable to political and social conflicts that may arise in the Congo.

Zoo Programs - SSP: As of July, 1998, there are 56 bonobos managed under the Bonobo SSP in North America. A masterplan (and revised edition) has been in effect since 1991 to coordinate a breeding and management program, with the goal of preserving genetic diversity and enhancing the social welfare of bonobos within this small captive population. Furthermore, the SSP has developed a *Three-Year Strategic Plan* to guide fundraising and SSP sponsorship of both *in-situ* and *ex-situ* conservation research and education efforts on behalf of the species.

The SSP works very closely with its European counterpart, the European Endangered Species Programme. Recently, the SSP and EEP jointly produced *The Care and Management of Bonobos in Captive Environments*, a guide that presents state-of-the art knowledge and recommendations on husbandry topics such as bonobo social behavior, nutrition, veterinary care, reproductive issues, and enclosure design. The manual has been distributed throughout the world to all facilities holding bonobos.

SSP member institutions continue to bring the natural history and plight of the bonobo to the attention of zoo visitors through workshops, publications, presentations and educational material. Because people will not conserve what they do not know and love, the SSP's greatest role in bonobo conservation may become public education. The SSP now works with an education advisor to promote programs about bonobos to zoos and other educational institutions in the U.S.

The SSP also engages in and supports conservation of bonobos in the Congo. Over the past 10 years, the SSP has fostered working relationships with field researchers and conservationists. The SSP currently supports a regional bonobo population survey as its priority *in-situ* conservation project. Furthermore, the SSP distributes conservation T-shirts in the

Congo and sponsors the production of school notebooks featuring information about bonobos.

Conservation: In the Congo, there are currently only two protected areas for the bonobo -- the Salonga National Park and the Luo River Scientific Reserve near Wamba. The Salonga National Park is the only federally protected reserve for bonobos, but their status in the park is unknown. The Luo River Reserve is a scientific research area that receives local government protection. At present, protection of bonobos within these reserves is highly dependent on the existence of expatriate research programs in these areas.

The current state of our knowledge concerning bonobo conservation is summarized in the *Action Plan for Pan paniscus: Report on Free Ranging Populations and Recommendations for Their Preservation*. The *Action Plan* was published by the Zoological Society of Milwaukee in 1994 and is endorsed by the IUCN Species Survival Commission. The *Action Plan* identifies priorities for bonobo conservation and serves as a guide for researchers, government officials and donor agencies in developing conservation programs. The *Action Plan* discusses the need for: regional surveys to determine where bonobo populations exist; conservation education throughout the Congo; economic benefits for local people from conservation projects; enforcement of anti-poaching laws; and enforced habitat protection.

As noted in the *Action Plan*, one of the major obstacles to developing conservation strategies for the bonobo is the lack of knowledge about where bonobo populations occur and the extent to which these are threatened. The *Action Plan*, therefore, recommends regional surveys. The Bonobo SSP will support one such survey in the Salonga National Park. If a viable population of bonobos is confirmed, the Salonga Park represents the largest potential area of protection for bonobos. As part of this project, Congolese field biologists will receive training in survey methodology in order to conduct the Salonga survey and other needed bonobo surveys.

Because of the region's periodic political and economic crises, extensive wildlife conservation efforts often have been postponed. However, the emergence of a new government in the Congo may offer new opportunities for bonobo conservation. The government has expressed its commitment to preserving 15% of the nation's territory in a protective network and to strengthening law enforcement within protected areas such as the Salonga National Park; the caveat, however, is that conservation must be commensurate with economic development. Many

potential sources of support and development have yet to return to the Congo since the 1997 civil war.

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