

<NEWS>

Bonobos in the Salonga National Park

Summary by Rob Dormaels of an article published in a Belgian newsmagazine (magazine Knack 11/3/98) that reported Dr. Ellen Van Krunkelsven's recent visit to the Park.

Ellen Van Krunkelsven visited the Parc de la Salonga in December 1997. I will give you the short story translated from Dutch. The biologist Ellen Van Krunkelsven is a specialist on bonobos and has prepared her doctorate in the Plankendael Park in Belgium since 1994, and in the Lomako forest in the equator region in Congo (Zaire).

In 1995, American scientists made up an action plan for the protection of bonobos, as they estimated the remaining number of bonobos on 10,000 to 20,000. They did not, however, exclude the possibility that the total number could be reduced to 5,000. About the Salonga Park, there was nobody who could confirm if there were any bonobos remaining. After the creation of the park, the first scientists had been told by the resident people that there were no bonobos in the park. This idea kept living for over 20 years.

In 1987, three German scientists visited the northern border of the park for three days, and found one group of 3 bonobos. All further plans to explore the park failed by the presence of poachers. At the end of the 1980s, an expedition of elephant researchers has been attacked by poachers with war-ammunition. Afterwards, the park guards confirmed the presence of bonobos throughout the Park.

Van Krunkelsven decided to check the presence/absence of bonobos herself, with the aid of the Milwaukee County Zoological Society. The expedition took place in December 1997. They stayed for 1 month and searched for bonobos in four locations of the park intensively. In all of the four places, the presence of bonobos and elephants has been confirmed. They also heard the sounds of the mysterious Congo peacock which has never been studied in the natural habitat. They also found traces of leopards and golden cats, although buffaloes and hippopotami must have suffered more of the poachers' presence.

Ellen estimates on scientific basis that there must be

around 1 bonobo per square kilometer, which means that there could be 17,000 bonobos living in the northern part of the park which is a reassuring number. However, the expedition took place with high risks by poachers' attacks. Several poachers' camps were found. They questioned several poachers who were part of a group led by one of the Mobutus former colonels. They told about a young elephant they caught a few months ago and they sold it for 15 US dollars (!!!!!) in Mbandaka.

Van Krunkelsven wants to support a more effective park management and focussed actions against poaching, which is the main problem. It is not too late to save the remaining animal populations as most animals are still present, although in small numbers.

It should be lamented to realize, she concludes, that the animal that is genetically the closest to humans, has no square meter of natural habitat on the globe, where they are effectively protected.