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Bonobos at the market of Basankusu (Equateur Province, DRC) in 1999: new evidence for bonobos between the Ikelemba and Bosomba rivers

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Introduction

The outbreak of war in 1998 caused an almost complete stop on available information regarding the status of the bonobo (*Pan paniscus*) in their distribution area. Our research team was the last to leave the Lomako Forest in November 1998. No researcher has returned to this area since then.

Basankusu is one of the major towns in the surroundings of the Lomako Forest. It is situated strategically at the confluence of the Lopori and Maringa rivers (Fig. 1). Meat hunted for commercial reasons in 5-10% of the bonobo distribution area eventually ends up at this market (3). Between November 1998 and September 1999, M. Bofaso and J. Lompongo (local collaborators of the Bonobo in Situ project, Lomako-Iyema, Royal Zoological Society

Antwerp) surveyed the bushmeat market of Basankusu. This study was set up as a large scale survey of the local fauna. In this paper, we present the information collected on the supply of bonobo meat. By inquiring about the origin of the carcasses, new information could be collected on the presence of bonobos in areas not yet surveyed.

Methods

Data collection took place in Basankusu. On a daily basis, two markets are organized (6:30am-12am and 14pm-17:30pm). The bushmeat section of these markets consists of two counters/rows, about 30meters each, and can thus be easily surveyed for the arrival of bushmeat traders. All carcasses, fresh or smoked, were counted and the species identified. Additionally, we asked the trader about the origin of the carcass (i.e. the region where it was hunted). In general, people referred to regions by indicating the rivers that give access to them. Data were collected on 224 days between November 1998 and September 1999.

Opportunistically, information on trade of bonobo orphans was collected on boats on their way to Kinshasa when they are moored in Basankusu.

Results

Over the 11 month study period, a total of 14 bonobo carcasses were encountered at the market (Table 1). Most of them were hunted in the forests along the Bosomba river (n=4) and the

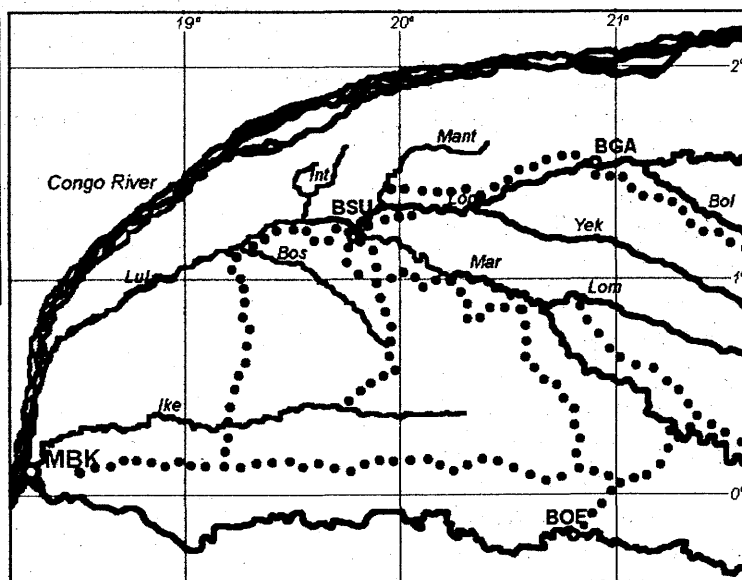
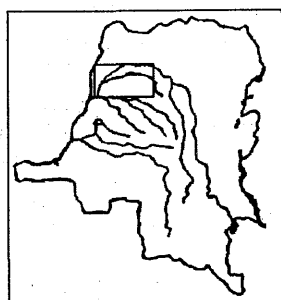


Figure 1. Basankusu and its surroundings.

Cities:

BOE :Boende;
BGA :Bongandanga;
BSU :Basankusu;
MBK :Mbandaka.

Rivers:

Bol :Bolomba;
Ike :Ikelemba;
Int :Intantando;
Mant :Mntoku;
Mar :Maringa;
Lom :Lomako;
Lul :Lulonga;
Yek :Yekokora.

..... : Road.



Lomako river (n=4). All carcasses, except the one hunted in the forest along the Lopori river, had been smoked before their arrival at Basankusu. The gender was recorded for 6 individuals (4 males, 2 females).

During opportunistic visiting of boats on their way to Kinshasa, two infants were encountered. They both came from upriver Maringa.

Table 1. List of bonobo carcasses recorded at the market of Basankusu between November 1998 and September 1999.

Date	Origin	Smoked/Fresh
17-11-98	Yekokora	Smoked
04-12-98	Maringa	Smoked
17-12-98	Yekokora	Smoked
06-01-99	Ikelemba	Smoked
06-01-99	Ikelemba	Smoked
12-02-99	Lopori	Fresh
11-03-99	Lomako	Smoked
04-05-99	Bosomba	Smoked
11-06-99	Lomako	Smoked
21-07-99	Bosomba	Smoked
25-08-99	Bosomba	Smoked
31-08-99	Bosomba	Smoked
06-09-99	Lomako	Smoked
06-09-99	Lomako	Smoked

Discussion

Bushmeat market studies are important for the large scale monitoring of the status and exploitation of fauna (3, 4). This is especially true in areas where political instability or war conditions make it almost impossible for field researchers to survey yet unexplored regions or to continue their activities at existing field sites. In case of the bonobo, the Wamba and Lomako field research sites have, since the end of 1998, been situated on the front lines of different warring factions (Force Armée Congolais (FAC), Mouvement pour la Liberation du Congo (MLC), Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie (RCD)). These sites have since been inaccessible to field researchers. Information on hunting activities and the status of the bonobo in the region is therefore completely lacking. The present survey of an important bushmeat market in the bonobo distribution area provides basic information on the relative intensity of bonobo hunting and new information on the distribution of the bonobo.

The total number of bonobo carcasses (=14) represent about 0.15% of all carcasses recorded over 224 days. This number of carcasses recorded is probably only a fraction of the total

number traded. In a questionnaire given to 53 hunters and traders of bonobo-meat, 30% indicated that trading of bonobo meat can only be done in secret (JD, unpubl. inform.). The fact that the bonobo is a protected species is common knowledge. Traders will refrain from exposing bonobo meat in public at the risk of losing their merchandise, especially in periods of harassment by soldiers. Nevertheless, the available information do not indicate a recent rise in hunting pressure on bonobos. But we emphasize that one has to be cautious with any conclusion.

Most bonobo carcasses originate from both the forests along the Lomako-Yekokora rivers (n=6) and those along the Bosomba-Ikelemba rivers (n=6). The forest between the Lomako and Yekokora rivers is known to harbour important populations of bonobos (2), however, no information was available on the presence of bonobos between the Bosomba and Ikelemba rivers. The present information indicates the importance of the latter forest for future conservation activities (3) and as an area for more detailed bonobo surveys (1).

No bonobo carcass originated from the forest block between the Congo and the Lulonga-Lopori rivers (up to Bongandanga). The present data however do not yet allow any conclusion on the presence of absence of bonobos in this part of their potential range.

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