
<NOTE> Field Research at Lukuru, Democratic Republic of Congo

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In 1992, Jo Thompson initiated fieldwork studying the bonobos (*bilia*) of the Lukuru research site. The Lukuru Project area delineates the most southern limit, at latitude 4 degrees South, of bonobo occupation within the species geographic distribution. The hilly terrain within the Lukuru consists of irregular forest and grassland mosaic habitat increasing in elevation out of the southern periphery of the topographic Congo Basin. Although it is clear that bonobos require access to forest, field data from the Lukuru conclude that bonobos also occupy and utilize a drier and more open habitat (1).

Assisted by her team of local Congolese field staff and research assistants, observations confirm that grassland fruits are consumed by resident bonobos. Other completed work includes initial studies of the vegetation cover, bonobo food choices, estimates of the presence, abundance

and distribution of ground-level plant foods used by the local bonobos, and regional population estimates based on repeated night bed censuses within a defined sample area and encounters with bonobos (1). Findings to date extend our knowledge of the adaptability of the bonobo. In addition, in 1997 the Lukuru Project began to focus their efforts on the Bososandja bonobo community. This bonobo community frequents a series of perennial pools and an observation blind was erected at the side of the pools to conduct detailed observations.

In order to improve existing local levels and create additional avenues of protection for the local wildlife community, especially the bonobo and its habitat in 1997-1998, the Lukuru Project purchased land rights (2) through traditional adjudicated law. This conservation concession corresponds to the range of the Bososandja bonobo community (2). This conservation concession is called the Bososandja Faunal Reserve and is managed under civil authority. In 2003 steps began to expand this locally protected area and upgrade its protected status to Community Forest under the auspices of the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature.

In 1997, the Lukuru Project became involved with the issue of timber concessions when a Malaysian prospecting team came to the Lukuru Project area (3). To encourage responsible land-use management for the social and environmental good of the local community and its' wildlife, Lukuru Project personnel met with the logging company evaluation team. In 1998, the logging company abandoned their initiative for timber harvest in the Lukuru (3). The intervening years of conflict, insecurity, human density fluxes, and internal strife interrupted managed activities between 1998-2002 across the nation (4). In 2002, the DRC government reactivated the forestry sector, reformed forestry policies, and introduced a new forestry code. In order to proceed in an era of responsible management, the government forestry sector put a prohibition on new concession allocations and canceled previous contracts covering millions of hectares. Important government efforts began to institute legal reforms in the forestry and wildlife

(nature conservation) management sectors, as well as take steps toward elaboration of a land-use plan for the forestry sector.

In 2003 the Lukuru Project was invited to launch a sensitization campaign to inform and educate logging companies about the biodiversity within concessions south of the Congo River (5). In this way biodiversity concerns will be introduced preceding allocation of a concession. The forestry sector is concerned about granting timber concessions in areas environmentally important for: the location of protected areas and community forests; the location of wildlife field-research sites; bonobo (*bilua*) distribution and sensitive habitats; the maintenance of important wildlife corridors; special assemblages of biodiversity; and the location of critical bonobo populations.

Along with the local staff, the Lukuru Project continues to build on our prior work throughout the greater Lukuru area. To date, most of our research has focused on ecology, distribution, human issues, and conservation (6,7,8). Our future work continues to focus on establishing the conservation capacity to protect bonobos; continuing our research, conservation, and education efforts in the region; and strengthening our relationship with the local people. Lukuru Project activities will continue with emphasis on habituating resident bonobos, conducting regional expeditions to survey for the presence and abundance of bonobo concentrations, meeting with local officials to involve them in Lukuru work, and conducting educational campaign meetings locally and throughout distant villages within the Project area. The Lukuru Project will reestablish initiatives to institute an annual poultry (chickens, ducks, guineas, etc.) inoculation project in association with the villages and settlements in proximity with the Bososandja Faunal Reserve, sink a tube-well in the villages of Yasa and Bokomo where we experience seasonal water shortage and the women spend considerable time and effort transporting daily water supplies for their family usage, explore ways to improve the diet of villagers outside the national park (including introducing beans and peanuts) (8), and investigate a tree planting experiment. Beyond responding to critical needs, the Lukuru Project

has expanded its mission to include sustainable strategies for livelihoods, community needs, improved quality of life through appropriate technology projects, and community development outside Protected Areas but in response to human needs for those local people living alongside bonobos.

References

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