

# Gazing into the bonobo mirror

A former AG Young Adventurer of the Year ventures into the Congo jungle to see humankind's closest living relative.

**C**ONGO. The very word, spoken as if with a drumbeat at the back of the tongue, conjures foreboding: a vast jungle, an impenetrable "heart of darkness" where the only avenue of open space and light is the web of waterways that drains a basin about the size of WA and the NT combined. And there dwells the bonobo, the closest living relative to modern humans; with the chimpanzee, it shares 98.6 per cent of our DNA. It's one of the world's most peaceful, gregarious species, with the intelligence and language capacity of a three-year-old human, yet its habitat is so remote, and the Congo so savaged by successive wars, that only a few of the hardest scientists have had the tenacity to study bonobos at length and barely a handful of film crews have recorded their startling behaviour in the wild.

Bonobos, once called pygmy chimps, often walk bipedally, standing 1.4 m tall. Their society is largely matriarchal and very nurturing: juveniles, even after weaning, will sometimes continue suckling until the age of six. Yet despite their peaceful ways, and their well-known penchant for frequent and deeply varied sexual behaviour, there may be as few as 5000–15,000 bonobos left.

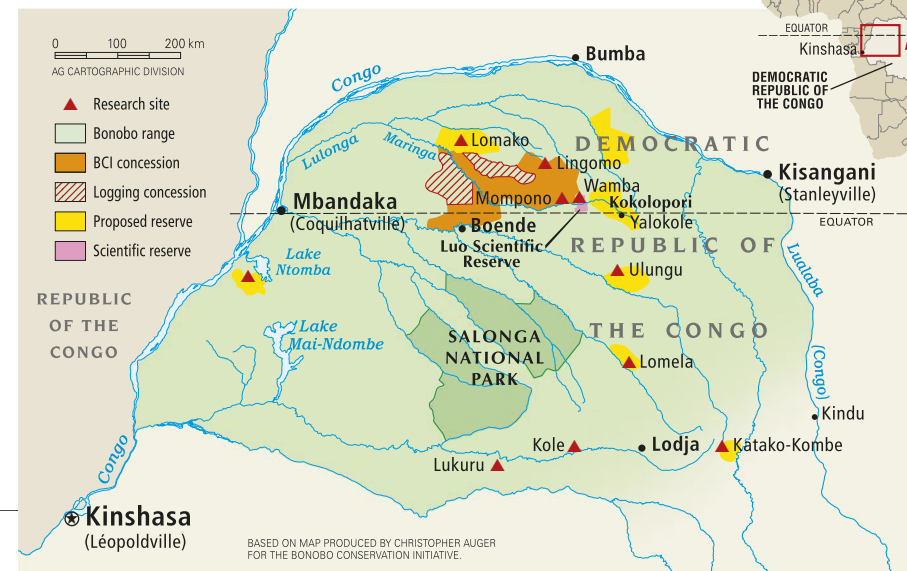
I first became interested in bonobos 17 years ago, while reading a book by



Sydney barristers Angus Gemmell (above, at left) and Phil Strickland have been raising funds and awareness to help protect the 5000–15,000 bonobos that remain in the wild.

Australian biologist Jeremy Griffith, *Beyond the human condition*. The book describes bonobos as it discusses human origins and psychological development. Since then I've spent some time with Japanese bonobo researchers and in 2001 worked as the executive director of the Bonobo Conservation Initiative (BCI) in Washington, DC, USA.

Taking advantage of the current window of peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, late last year I embarked on a 1500 km expedition up the mighty Congo River – the most voluminous in the world after the Amazon –



An orphaned bonobo (far left) gazes forlornly in the Congo's Lola Ya Bonobo orphanage, near Kinshasa, which also cares for older bonobos (left). A rare shot of a wild bonobo (below).



and its Lulonga and Maringa tributaries to the BCI's research centre, in a region known as Kokolopori, where the greatest concentration of bonobos appears to be. I travelled with two Australian friends, Dr Luke Bennett and Phil Strickland. With local guides we set off from the bustling river port of Mbandaka in three pirogues – better described as hollowed-out logs bound together with vine and frayed rope. In places the river is so wide that one bank is not visible from the other. We motored continuously, our pace no faster than a light jog, cooking meals on coals placed on sand towards the bow. The boat's movement through the haze of heat, humidity and horseflies the size of cicadas created some cool relief, and occasionally drifts of butterflies paid visits in a kaleidoscope of electric blues and greens, or flutters of butter gold. Small floating islands formed by masses of long grass were making their journey downstream. Some of these 'grass-bergs' were replete with a small tree or two and birds, no doubt attracted by the plethora of insects resting on their flights across the wide river.

The walls of forest and omnipresent cliffs made us feel as if we were journeying down a time tunnel, further and further away from the superficial

preoccupations of human affairs to what is primal. We were the first Westerners in a long time to travel this stretch of river and received a mixture of responses: most friendly, some baffled, and a few angry gesticulations clearly telling us to get the hell away.

But after seven days and nights, and narrowly avoiding a series of treacherous log-jams in the final stretches, we received a rapturous welcome from the Kokolopori villagers. They'd made the trek through jungle to our disembarkation point, and perhaps had been waiting for days for our arrival. Word had been transmitted up river by their bush telegraph – beating drums.

We marched for an hour through lightly undulating rainforest, pleasantly free of dense undergrowth, and then walked another few kilometres along a track to the village of Yalokole and the BCI centre. It's partly funded by a grant I'd organised from the Australian Great Ape Survival Project.

At first light the next day, high on the limbs of one of the emergent giants that fan like an umbrella over the canopy, we saw the bonobos. Part of a clan of 20, they were rousing themselves from slumber in one of their favourite fruit trees. Phil, Luke and I, each covered in a sheen of sweat from our forest march on the

## An adventurer's CV: Angus Gemmell

**Occupation:** Barrister, in defamation law **Home:** Sydney **1989:** Awarded Knox Grammar School's Prize for Adventure for activities undertaken during his final years at school **1990:** Embarked on 35,000 km Australia-Wide Adventuring Youth (AWAY) expedition taking homeless youth on remote adventures (AG 25) **1991:** Awarded AG's Young Adventurer of the Year **1993–94:** Took two years off studying law, living in Zambia and South Africa, and with the Wilderness Leadership School in Durban, South Africa **1996:** Graduated from the University of NSW **1999:** Achieved highest score in NSW Bar Association exams **1999–2002:** Three-year journey around the world, including horse trek through Mongolia, remote travel in Tibet, Nepal, Burma, Alaska and Norway, climbing expedition to the Ruwenzori Mountains in Uganda, six-week solo whitewater kayaking expedition through Mongolia, and working as executive director for the Bonobo Conservation Initiative in Washington, DC **2004:** Two-week kayaking expedition down the remote Karuay river in south-east Venezuela **2005:** Trekking the Kokoda Track **2006–07:** Congo bonobo expedition

heels of fleet-footed trackers, could barely suppress our excitement. We talked in hushed tones as the bonobos languidly munched on forest treats.

Their habitat is rich in fruits, nuts and edible plants, and this abundant food is perhaps one of the primary reasons bonobos enjoy an existence largely free of angst and competition. Their diet is supplemented by large insects and, occasionally, other small mammals, such as the 40 cm high forest duiker – a miniature antelope. Unlike chimpanzees, which are known to hunt as a pack to kill monkeys and other chimpanzees from neighbouring clans, the bonobos share the forest harmoniously with other primates and adjacent

bonobo groups. Scientists have even observed a bonobo female grooming a young red colobus monkey.

As the sun climbed higher and the morning mist dissipated, two females embraced face to face and acrobatically rubbed their vulvas together. Their sexual contact was brief, lasting no more than 10 seconds, and seemed almost as perfunctory as a kiss on the cheek. One of the females then turned and presented to a nearby male and they mated for an equally short period. Having thus made their reassuring morning greetings the bonobos moved off swiftly through the canopy, and we fell in step behind the trackers trying to follow below.



The trackers' salaries are paid by BCI through a local environmental organisation, Vie Sauvage. Thirty-six trackers are currently employed – six for each of the six groups of bonobos currently under observation in the Kokolopori region.

When we rested for lunch – the bonobos having proved too fast to keep up with – Phil pointed excitedly to a movement in the undergrowth no more than 15 m away. An adult bonobo had returned as if to check on us. It was walking past on two legs in waist-high undergrowth, looking over its shoulder directly at Phil. The frequent preference of bonobos for upright locomotion challenges the thought that humans

only began to walk upright when they left the forests for the savannah. The angle and alignment of the bonobo hip structure matches almost exactly that of our 2-million-year-old ancestor, *Australopithecus afarensis*.

On the second day of tracking we saw the bonobos halt for a midday rest, feeding in a nut tree. Necks aching from looking up for two days, Luke, Phil and I lay on the spongy forest floor, directly beneath a group of 17 bonobos.

For two hours we watched, transfixed by their tranquillity. Three mothers were in a tight bundle together, quietly and intimately grooming their infants, regardless of which infant belonged to which mother.

After spending a week with the trackers, observing, absorbing and filming bonobos, each of us was moved by the feeling of being watched curiously by another conscious being. When a bonobo is close and looks you in the eye, it's like holding up a mirror to humanity's collective past.

We waved farewell to the villagers gathered on the riverside, and once more boarded our trusty pirogues, this time going with the flow of water, back down river – out of the time tunnel – to resume our modern lives.

ANGUS GEMMELL