

## 'Hippie chimps' fast disappearing as dinner

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**MBIHE-MOKELE, Congo (AP) -- Scientists are struggling to save the fast-disappearing bonobo, the gentle "hippie chimp" known for resolving squabbles through sex rather than violence.**

Unfortunately, bonobos are prized by Congolese for their tasty meat, and many villagers who are illegally hunting the wiry, wizen-faced apes don't realize how close their prey is to extinction. "Bonobos are an icon for peace and love, the world's 'hippie chimps,'" said Sally Coxe of the Washington-based Bonobo Conservation Initiative. "To let them die off would be a catastrophe."

The animals are known for greeting rival groups with genital handshakes and sensual body rubs. Bonobo spats are swiftly settled -- often with a French kiss and a quick round of sex. Despite all the sex, however, female bonobos give birth to a single infant only once every five years, making the species especially vulnerable.

The bonobo, or pan paniscus, is native only to the vast rain forest in this huge central African nation, living high off the ground in treetop nests. As few as 5,000 may now remain in Congo, down from an estimated 100,000 in 1984, said Ino Guabini, a primatologist with the World Wildlife Fund. "There is no question that bonobos are seriously threatened," Guabini said, speaking over a shrill forest symphony of birds, animals and insects. "We need urgent measures or there is no way we can protect the species."

But for poor villagers, bonobos can be lucrative business, with much of the meat heading for expensive, clandestine meals at restaurants in the cities. One bonobo can earn \$200 for Richard Ipaka, a 50-year-old part-time poacher who lives in the provincial capital, Mbandaka. "That's enough money for two months," he said. Like many Congolese, he said he did not know bonobos are found in the wild only in his country. And like many others, he was skeptical that the ape is endangered. "Our ancestors have been eating bonobos for centuries. How could they disappear?" Ipaka said.

But the peace-loving bonobos are increasingly difficult to sight, and not just because they're good at hiding, suspended from the high branches of trees or swiftly traversing the lattice of thick, muddy roots strewn over the forest floor. The best place to glimpse them these days may be the Bonobo Paradise sanctuary in Congo's capital, Kinshasa, which is home to a few dozen rescued from poachers by police.

Poachers have devised an array of methods to bag bonobos. Hunters in Congo's Equator province say the apes are most easily captured when asleep drunk, so poachers intoxicate them with beer and palm wine. The dazed bonobos are stuffed in bags and carted off to local markets. Other poachers use guns, and some leave poisoned meat in the forest, silently killing packs of up to 20 bonobos at a time. Ipaka, who uses a battle-worn Kalashnikov assault rifle to shoot bonobos sleeping in their nests, said he hunts most often with bands of unemployed militiamen left over from a string of rebellions, coups and conflict that ravaged Congo beginning in the mid-1990s.

The bonobo is the subject of age-old songs and legends, and conservationists hope to turn some of those traditions to their advantage. In the village of Botwali, for instance, locals believe the bonobo was once a man who lived with their tribe but now hides in the forest because an angry tree stripped him of its clothes. "The bonobo is a man, only it is ashamed to be naked. It is wrong to hunt or eat bonobos," said Mokelo Moibula, chief of a village committee that works to protect bonobos.

The Bonobo Conservation Initiative has begun working with villages that hold such hunting taboos to create a series of reserves for the graceful animals. "So far we're working on an area larger than the size of Wales, and it's getting bigger," Coxe said. That may not be enough. Even provincial police who are supposed to protect the bonobo are mostly ignorant about dangers to its survival, and they are often sympathetic to those who eat it. Some officers consume bonobo meat, too, said Clerivent Kanyamba, deputy chief of the Equator province police.

"What can we do if bonobo meat is tasty?" Kanyamba said.