



Empty Hands, Open Arms: The Race to Save Bonobos in the Congo and Make Conservation Go Viral

Deni Ellis Béchard

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When acclaimed author Deni Béchard first learned of the last living bonobos—matriarchal great apes that are, alongside the chimpanzee, our closest relatives in the animal kingdom—he was completely astonished. How could the world possibly accept the extinction of this majestic species?

Béchard discovered one relatively small NGO, the Bonobo Conservation Initiative (BCI), which has done more to save bonobos than many far larger organizations. Based on the author's extensive travels in the Congo and Rwanda, this book explores BCI's success, offering a powerful, truly postcolonial model of conservation. In contrast to other traditional conservation groups Béchard finds, BCI works closely with Congolese communities, addressing the underlying problems of poverty and unemployment, which lead to the hunting of bonobos. By creating jobs and building schools, they gradually change the conditions that lead to the eradication of the bonobos.

This struggle is far from easy. Devastated by the worst military conflict since World War II, the Congo and its forests continue to be destroyed by aggressive logging and mining. Béchard's fascinating and moving account—filled with portraits of the extraordinary individuals and communities who make it all happen offers a rich example of how international conservation must be reinvented before it's too late.

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