

# Congo Efforts Help Apes & People

When she first met Isomana Edmond about seven years ago, Dr. Gay E. Reinartz was impressed with his skills in the rain forest: tracking animals and identifying plants. “He knows at least 400 species of trees, and can track bonobos in the densest rain forest,” she said. “Yet he was handicapped by his inability to read or write. Sadly, the jobs he received as a park guard were menial, and his vast indigenous knowledge was difficult to tap.” Through his work for the Zoological Society, he learned first how to read a compass. That earned him a lot of respect among his peers. “His greatest contribution,” said Dr. Reinartz, “is that he is unsurpassed in his ability to find bonobos and understand their behavior in the forest. In this sense, he has contributed significantly to our success in conserving bonobos in Congo.”

Edmond is the longest term Congolese employee of the Zoological Society of Milwaukee (ZSM). He also is an example of positive things that can happen when a conservation organization gets involved in field work to protect an endangered species. Ten years ago the ZSM sent researchers into the world’s second largest rain forest, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, with the intention of surveying the area for bonobos, endangered great apes. Dr. Reinartz – who is the ZSM’s conservation coordinator – has directed the program since its inception in 1997. The researchers began documenting evidence of bonobos in Salonga National Park, a park that was set aside to protect bonobos and forest elephants. Some skeptics said bonobos didn’t even exist in the park. Evidence collected by Dr. Reinartz and the ZSM team over the last 10 years – everything from footprints to photos – has proven that bonobos indeed live in the forests of the Salonga. Other accomplishments include building Etate, the ZSM research station in Salonga that was converted from a poaching camp, and



Villagers from around Salonga National Park in Congo receive farming tools and seeds from the Zoological Society, thanks to a self-help grant from the U.S. Embassy in Kinshasa.

developing a suite of projects in Salonga known collectively as the Bonobo and Congo Biodiversity Initiative (BCBI).

At a January 11, 2007, celebration at the Milwaukee County Zoo of a decade of work in Congo, ZSM CEO Dr. Bert Davis said: “For 10 years Dr. Reinartz and her colleagues have ventured into the heart of Africa, braving bugs, heat and thick rain forest to help conserve and protect the bonobo.” Along the way, the project expanded from helping apes to helping people: the Salonga park guards and the population from local villages surrounding the park.

“Dr. Gay Reinartz realized that she needed to build relationships with the Congolese,” said Dr. Gil Boese, ZSM president emeritus and president of the Foundation for Wildlife Conservation, Inc., which manages funds for some of the ZSM’s projects in the Congo. “She has helped them develop a vested interest in conservation by giving them jobs and job training. She has worked on many fronts. We built a research station with shelter for the staff. We have supported and built local schools. We have provided basic

supplies. Gay Reinartz has built up trust with village leaders. All of these things needed to be done just to succeed with basic conservation projects. These programs do not succeed unless people experience direct benefits.”

Among the projects the ZSM initiated or supported are anti-poaching patrols along the Yenge and Salonga Rivers, and around Etate; paramilitary training for Salonga Park guards; and delivery of salaries (during the years of Congo’s civil war) to guards who had not been paid for years. “We’ve worked with the regional military authorities to help provide training and reinforce the guards’ presence in the park,” said Dr. Reinartz. “As part of the park’s anti-poaching program, we provided two park stations with pirogues (dugout-canoe-style boats), outboard motors, and fuel to form mobile anti-poaching patrols. In the first six months after getting the pirogue, the guards at one station confiscated over 3,500 metallic and 2,500 nylon snares. To augment the meager guard force, we have hired 21 supplementary guards. As a result, eight renegade military poachers have been arrested in the last two years.” The ZSM also has provided Etate, a strategic patrol post as well as research station, with a short-wave radio, solar panels and research equipment. All supplies have to be carried into Etate by pirogue because there are no major roads into Salonga, and the only airport is a four-day walk from the research station.

Upon arriving in Salonga, you enter an area of great beauty and also extreme poverty. “Where you have poverty, you have poaching,” said Reinartz. “About 60% of the protein the local people eat comes from wild animals.

For villages surrounding Salonga, this often leads to poaching in the park.” So the ZSM has embarked on yet another way to help bonobos and people at the same time: forming an agricultural cooperative. With funds from a self-help grant from the U.S. Embassy in Kinshasa (capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo), the ZSM is providing farming implements, seeds and agricultural training to villages around Etate. The ZSM engages an agriculture consultant, Homère Madjolokela, to teach people in six villages how to grow crops that can be sold to major markets. Planting was to start in February when Dr. Reinartz and her team returned to Salonga.



## Bonobo Book Now Available

Learn more about Dr. Gay E. Reinartz’s efforts in the Congo as well as her work as coordinator of the Association of Zoos & Aquariums’ Bonobo Species Survival Plan. Order the book *Bonobos: Encounters in Empathy*, written and donated to the Zoological Society of Milwaukee (ZSM) by Jo Sandin, a retired Milwaukee Journal Sentinel writer. She also provides a fascinating look at the Milwaukee County Zoo’s group of 21 bonobos, the world’s largest group of bonobos in a zoo environment. The book costs \$22 plus tax and shipping. For more information, see the form in the issue of *Wild Things* newsletter packaged with this *Alive* or go online at [www.zoosociety.org](http://www.zoosociety.org). Book proceeds benefit the Zoo’s bonobos and the ZSM’s bonobo efforts in Africa.

An interesting part of the project is the role that women play. “One condition for providing agricultural materials and training is that women, who do most of the work in the field, be part of the decision-making process for the agricultural cooperative,” said Dr. Reinartz. Women normally are not part of local management committees.

Literacy training for adults and education for children is another way the ZSM is getting the Congolese invested in conservation. “We have built four schools, hired teachers and provided teaching materials,” said Dr. Reinartz. “When you ask the people what they want, it’s health care and education for their families. In the region of Etate there is an 80% illiteracy rate. Most of the park guards cannot read nor write. Isomana Edmond’s illiteracy was his main frustration. Edmond was the one who suggested that we teach the park guards to read and write. Last year the ZSM hired a tutor for the Etate patrol post, and within six months the guards could, remarkably, read their country’s new constitution.”

Edmond himself has learned to write. Dr. Reinartz, speaking at the Jan. 11 program to BCBI supporters, projected a picture on a screen of a proud Edmond and a letter written in his own hand-writing. It was a one-page letter to his wife.

-By Paula Brookmire

Isomana Edmond has learned to read and to use a Global Positioning System unit through the Zoological Society of Milwaukee (ZSM).



Dr. Gay E. Reinartz (left) and some of the ZSM team map a route through the rain forest looking for bonobos.