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## Bonobos – our better nature

06/21/2010

Guest Post by [Vanessa Woods](#), author of the just released book, [Bonobo Handshake](#). Check it out!

Only one in four people know that bonobos (*Pan paniscus*) are a great ape. Even fewer know that they are our closest living relative, along with chimpanzees. Even people who do know what bonobos are probably think of them as the ‘hippie ape’, a bizarre primate echo of the 60s, when making love was more important than anything else.

What people don’t realize is that bonobos could save the world. For decades, we have focused on chimpanzees as the model for human behavior. Chimpanzees are both the light and dark side of ourselves. They love, mourn their dead, and have sophisticated politics that could baffle a Washington insider. They also beat their females, have a form of warfare, and their murder rates are comparable to human hunter gatherers. What more perfect animal could you have for understanding the biology of human nature?

I’ve been travelling to the Democratic Republic of Congo since 2005 to try and find the answer. We work in an orphanage called Lola ya Bonobo – the world’s only bonobo sanctuary with the largest captive population in the world. What we found there was incredible enough to prompt me to write a book called Bonobo Handshake.

Ignoring bonobos means ignoring what humans could be. Bonobos are female dominated. They have never been seen to kill each other. Infants get the kind of idyllic childhood most of us can only dream about.



*Author and biologist Vanessa Woods with a bonobo*

We tend to think of intelligence as being a linear scale, with humans at the pinnacle. But I've decided that bonobos are **the most intelligent of all the great apes**. Because for all our technology, all our intelligence, all our things, we have not been able to maintain peace in our societies, or the greater world.

Every 15 seconds a woman is beaten by her partner. One in three women worldwide experience violence. There have only been 26 days without war since World War II. And right now, there are seven conflicts going on in the world that are killing over 1,000 people a year.

Bonobos live in a peaceful society. They use sex to diffuse tension in the group. As humans, I'm not suggesting for a second that sex will be our mechanism to diffuse tension, but we need to find one. And that means finding out everything we can about bonobos. What is different about their physiology, psychology and behavior that allows them to exist without violence? What can we do, as humans, to emulate that, the way we used bats to develop sonar, and hummingbirds to develop helicopters.

There are as few as 10,000 bonobos left in the wild, and the number is declining. If they go extinct, not only will we have lost our only peaceful cousin, we will have lost our only chance at truly understanding ourselves.

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I remember this from a national geographic video in my college biology class

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