

E-mail from Giulia Rossi

This mail is from Giulia Rossi, I am the field assistant on Health Bonobo Project in Lui Kotale. I have been working here since August 2019 following bonobos every day, paying particularly attention to their health conditions and to what they eat both when they are sick and when they are healthy.



On June 15th 2020 something unusual happened. It was a sunny morning and with Francesca, another assistant, I was following bonobos in their daily habitual search for food, when we suddenly stopped to rest in a very open part of forest located at around 3km from Lui Kotale camp. As soon as bonobos sit on the ground to take a rest I realized that all around trees have been cut and someone has been there long enough to build some kind of structures like an hut and a firewood place. I immediately felt like someone with bad intentions entered in my house when I was not in: who did come in our forest, so close to our camp and to bonobos? And why? I rapidly recorded a video to show it to all local workers and camp manager of the project. After less than one hour bonobos decided to leave and we went back to their daily routine. Interesting to notice that later during the day bonobos moved far away and made their night nests in another forest, more than 5km far from that spot.

Few days later Lui Kotale camp manager, Tommaso along with local workers went to visit that spot in the forest and they found out something completely unexpected: hidden inside a dense patch of vegetation, right next to the place we had been with bonobos there was the carcass of an adult elephant! It is sad to discover but poachers are here, in our forest. This discovery broke our hearts, everybody, internationals assistants and local workers felt personally touched.

Two weeks later bonobos moved back to the same area, this time followed by Maisie, another member of the current team. At 400 m from the poachers 'spot, bonobos stopped to rest in an open area. This time poachers' activity was even more obvious: elephant bones were spread all around and a second elephant had been hunted right there! In this second visit bonobos looked more scared, curious and careful: some of them climbed on trees screaming at the carcass while the bravest individuals approached the bones to smell on them. They all rested there, close to the bones, for more than one hour before moving back to the forest. One day later, it was me again to follow those bonobos, and unbelievably, right after they left the night nest site bonobos went back to the same place they had been the day before. There, the majority of the group climbed up on trees and started

to scream loud, they all looked scared and stressed. Vocalizations were endless; bonobos looked at each other, at me, and at the elephant's remains.

From my point of view the third visit was the most interesting one because bonobos went back to the spot where they had seen the elephant's remains as soon as they woke up. There was no food around and they had visited the place just on the day before. I wonder what they thought about. Was it curiosity or fear that motivated them to return to the carcass? Did they associate the bones to activities of humans? Raising such questions is frustrating because we will never get an answer. And still, the events reflect on a behavioral domain that remains largely hidden from us: how bonobos perceive environmental modifications and how they respond towards novel or unusual objects. In addition these events are very important and need to be shared as widely as possible to make all of us aware that illegal hunting and illegal trade of endangered species are not over. Conservation still needs our attention, our support and our efforts.

Giulia, August 2020