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Empty Hands, Open Arms: The Race To Save Bonobos In The Congo And Make Conservation Go Viral



Synopsis

When acclaimed author Deni BÃ©chard 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? BÃ©chard 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 BÃ©chard 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. BÃ©chard's fascinating and moving accountâ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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Customer Reviews

In the great-ape category of endangered species, gorillas and chimpanzees have so far received the bulk of media attention, mostly due to celebrity zoologists such as Dian Fossey and Jane

Goodall championing their cause. Hence, until recently, one unusual "and endangered" primate, the bonobo of the Congo rain forest, had been comparatively overlooked by photojournalists and TV nature-show producers, perhaps because the animals' penchant for promiscuous sex would make filming a tad risky. Fortunately, a nongovernmental organization called the Bonobo Conservation Initiative (BCI) has been quietly but effectively protecting bonobos' habitat and convincing their human neighbors to stop hunting them. For this absorbing report on the BCI's innovative methods, renowned journalist BÃ©chard mingled with Congo villagers and BCI fieldworkers, observing how the conservationists forged alliances with villagers to build new schools and create jobs. In a country torn by unremitting military strife and rapacious mining, BCI's work has also helped slow rain-forest destruction. BÃ©chard's masterful, adventure-driven reporting delivers an inspiring account of an all-too-rare ecological success story. --Carl Hays

Advance Praise for *Empty Hands, Open Arms*; Here is the matter of conservation given profound explanation; a searching and knowing consideration that enables an important social and political and cultural struggle in Africa to become a needed lesson for us who live elsewhere to ponder, take to heart. • Robert Coles, Pulitzer Prize-winning author, and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom; Into the Congo, this adventure reveals not a heart of darkness but a rich world of light, shade, and imperiled life, a connection between the human and the great circle of being. • James Engell, Editor of *Environment: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*; An inspired, poignant, and seriously researched look at a subject of profound importance. • Wade Davis, National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence and author of *The Serpent and the Rainbow*; A story that movingly illuminates the time we live in, a tale of an emblematic struggle in which the fate of all of us and our future on this planet are at stake. • Bruce Rich, author of *Mortgaging the Earth* and *To Uphold the World*; An emotionally-enthralling, nuanced voyage into the conundrums of bonobo conservation. • William Powers, author of *Blue Clay People: Seasons on Africa's Fragile Edge*; A brilliant example of how conservationists can work with communities to save not only their own immediate environments but also the world at large through courage, cooperation and compassion. • Grant Hayter-Menzies, author of *Imperial Masquerade* and *Shadow Woman*; Readers of this book will be entertained and moved by Deni BÃ©chard's stories about this remarkable endangered and irreplaceable species and those dedicating their lives to saving them. • Riane Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade* and *The Real Wealth of Nations*; The embodiment of the type of reporting that we dream of reading, but all too rarely

encounter; intelligent, engaged, and above all, astonishingly perceptive. •; Dinaw Mengestu, MacArthur Fellow and author of *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*; B  chard's riveting journey through the 'dark continent' provides a surprisingly uplifting story about a radically different and successful conservation program. •; David Suzuki, author of *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature* Reviews for *Empty Hands, Open Arms* "Journalist B  chard, a foreign correspondent familiar with war zones, probes beneath headlines describing the Congo as 'a country of such inhumanity that we find it incomprehensible' and finds another, more hopeful reality.... B  chard's adventurous travels in the Congo offer spice to this rich, complex account." •; Kirkus Reviews "For this absorbing report on the BCI's innovative methods, renowned journalist B  chard mingled with Congo villagers and BCI fieldworkers, observing how the conservationists forged alliances with villagers to build new schools and create jobs. In a country torn by unremitting military strife and rapacious mining, BCI's work has also helped slow rain-forest destruction. B  chard's masterful, adventure-driven reporting delivers an inspiring account of an all-too-rare ecological success story." •; Carl Hays, *Booklist* "A poignant exploration of a unique model of international conservation that re-imagines intervention for the benefit of both ecosystems and local communities." •; Vancouver Sun "A book that not only provides a rare ray of positivity in an often gloomy field but helps outsiders make sense of the Congo." •; Edmonton Journal, Montreal Gazette •; A vivid, inspiring book, imbued with Bechard's keen eye for detail. •; Maisonneuve Praise for Deni B  chard "Stunningly poignant." •; O, The Oprah Magazine "B  chard has a voice and a vision all his own, both tough-minded and passionately emotional." •; Kirkus Reviews "A clearly gifted writer." •; Robert Olen Butler

While this book focuses more on humans than bonobos, it presents a deep understanding of the politics of the Congo region that is helpful in understanding how to partner effectively with Africans to respond to the urgent need for conservation - of species and habitats.

Wonderful book not only about the Bonobos but about their fate and those who are trying to save them.

Empty Hands, Open Arms provides a compelling insight into the history and evolution of bonobo conservation in the Congo. There are lessons within for all of us who are trying to save our planet.

Very interesting study.

“Empty Hands, Open Arms” is a highly engaging read. Bechard smoothly moves from page-turning anecdotes to well researched narrative in a way that keeps the reader intrigued and immersed in the subject. This is the kind of book that anyone will find appealing because it covers a surprisingly wide-range of issues but never strays too far from intimate, human stories. From colonial history to human and ape evolution, this is one of those books that will change how one sees the world and our relationship with our closest primate cousins. It was fascinating to learn how different bonobo societies are from chimps and other great apes. Learning that bonobos have a matriarchal social structure and live together in relative harmony is pretty intriguing and somewhat provocative. Also, it was fascinating to learn more about the Congo rainforest “the earth’s second lung” and its crucial importance to global warming issues. This book helped me better understand international conservation issues. I am familiar with the intricacies of my local environmental issues but, like many, know of only a few massive, international conservation organizations (NGOs). “Empty Hands, Open Arms” will help anyone who cares about conservation to get familiar with the important and unique role small NGOs play in the international arena. For example, I was surprised to learn how and why some indigenous people may see large conservation groups as imperialists and more destructive to their way of life than industrial corporations. This was eye opening to say the least. One more thing I loved about this book is the way Bechard brought to the fore the compelling human stories of those working to save bonobos and those living in closest proximity to them. In short, I found this book to be worthy of the accolades it has earned.

I have been watching the evolving and the tragic story of the bonobos for years. This is not only the best book on the subject, but also a fascinating journey through the “small history” of one project into the “Big History” of humanity as a whole. The blend of personal biographies, conservation politics, local lore, and evolutionary recaps is most enlightening. This story is hugely important for us symbolically. I have long held a view that were it not for the bonobo genes in us which get expressed occasionally when times or environments are “good” for the human ape, we would have long ago exterminated ourselves. The whole bonobo saga right now does not imbue me with any sense of hope (I have just come back from China and I can tell you, the majority of mankind does not give a hoot (I hope Jane Goodall will forgive) about endangered tigers or hippos or bonobos. But books like Empty Hands allow us to hold a mirror to ourselves, just like Rachael

Carson's *The Silent Spring* did for me, inspiring years of conservation broadcasts. Not much has changed on the ground since the 60's, except maybe for the worse, what with the population growth and the general consumer frenzy that is also built into the genes of the short-sighted, ecocidal, pleasure seeking, twittering human primate. However, I was absolutely awed by the courage, dedication, humility and selflessness of the BCI staff and their local collaborators, paid and unpaid. I worked in Lebanon and the Caucasus for the NGOs but Congo seemed really daunting to me. I also appreciate the dedication, the courage and the objectivity of Deni BÃ©chard, the author of this book. I hope this book will be taken seriously by the various conservation groups and the NGOs around the world, as it espouses the only effective "participatory" model of conservation, not the glory, kudos, and grant-seeking path pursued by many large groups and foundations. Unfortunately, the only radical "solution" to the problem of ecocide practised by humanity on ever-larger scale I see (I have written a "science truth" novel *Project Nirvana* along these lines), is reducing human population by at least 50% (that will give a breathing space of maybe 25-50 years) and then working towards creating a bonobo/photosynthetic hybrid. Of course, I present this "solution" with a bit of wry smile :), as a literary satire. Get to work, folks! Time HAS run out...

This book appears to be the same as *"Of Bonobos and Men"* by the same author. Either way, a great read and wonderful documentation of why and how development and conservation must be done with inclusion of the affected people in order to have long term success. Having travelled and worked in the DRC, I can say this was portrayed realistically and with understanding of the complex issues of the area. I am newly inspired to keep working on my own projects there as well as share them with organizations like BCI, the subject of this book.

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