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

Deni Bechard
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Journalism, memoir, and adventure meld together to add clarity and ethos to the story of a Congolese community's efforts to conserving the bonobo ape.

Insightful, important, and at times heartbreaking, this gripping story of one organization's efforts to save an endangered species can serve as a model for any group that's attempting to make a difference in our quickly changing environment. Although *Empty Hands, Open Arms* is specific to bonobo conservation and a community in the Congo, its lessons can have far-reaching impact that's likely to inspire readers, no matter where they are.

The adventure to save the bonobos began when Deni Béchard first learned that these matriarchal great apes were threatened with extinction. As a reporter who's covered stories in Rwanda, Afghanistan, and Iraq, Béchard's penchant for exploration aligned with his desire to help the bonobos, and he soon found himself, passport in hand, at the Congolese border.

As he traveled to the Congo, Béchard found more than a lone, struggling conservation group—he discovered a deeply successful initiative that employed a community-based strategy. To save the bonobos, this group helped create jobs, build schools, and reduce poverty, slowly eliminating the factors leading to the apes' decline.

With sharp, compelling writing that displays Béchard's wit and insight, the book is part investigative journalism, part adventure tale, and part memoir. These three major strands combine beautifully, creating a clear picture of the conservation group's efforts but also giving readers a feeling of being on the ground in the Congolese sun, fighting hard against environmental degradation.

Although he details the efforts of a specific group, the Bonobo Conservation Initiative, Béchard also includes small moments from his travels, describing individuals from Congolese villages, as well as well-meaning researchers, to provide a better glimpse of the people affected by conservation, in addition to the animals.

Béchard is particularly adept at discovering the fissures within conservation efforts that thwart the work of even the most dedicated environmentalists. Conflicts between researchers and NGOs layer on top of governmental bureaucracy, limited resources, and widespread indifference. But even when delving into these issues, Béchard offers hope that even momentous obstacles like these can be overcome.
ELIZABETH MILLARD (November 30, 2013)

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