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## Serenading Bonobos

While BCI is focused primarily on protecting bonobos within their native habitat in the Congo rainforest, we know of many people who are supporting bonobos in a number of different—and sometimes surprising!—venues. Take, for example, Katarzyna Sadej, a San Diego-based professional opera singer and voice coach...

BCI was first introduced to Katarzyna through our Instagram account, @bonobodotorg. Katarzyna promotes bonobo awareness on Instagram, using the beautiful photos she takes of the San Diego Zoo bonobo troop. And that's not her only gift to her favorite great apes. Life for intelligent species, such as bonobos, can be monotonous in captivity; like humans, they enjoy a good show now and again. So, naturally, Katarzyna entertains the San Diego bonobos with songs! The San Diego Zoo has generously granted Katarzyna permission to tell us her incredible story.

*BCI: What is your relationship to the San Diego Zoo? How did you come to be involved with the bonobos living there?*

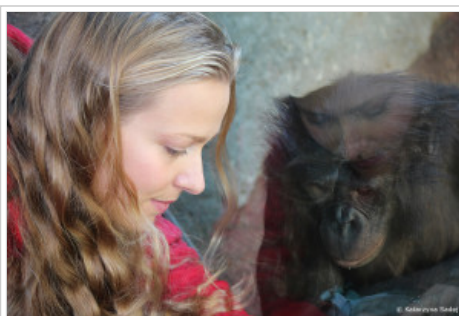
K: I'm a very enthusiastic member of the San Diego Zoo. If I am not away for singing, I try to go at least once per week – usually more! I really enjoyed photographing the bonobos at first, but then I made friends with a couple of them, who will now greet me when I visit. Once you start a relationship with an amazing being like that, it's very difficult to ignore!

*BCI: How was the idea of singing to the bonobos first brought up to you and by whom?*

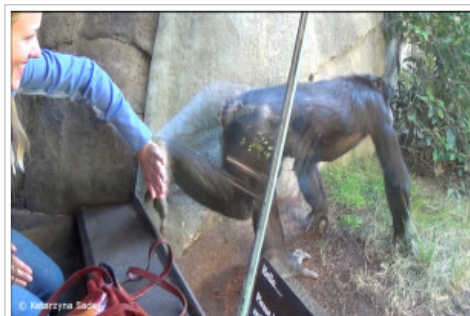
K: It was actually very random. I was having a casual conversation with one of the other bonobo fans at the zoo one day and I mentioned that I thought it would be an interesting study to see how the bonobos react to operatic vocalizations, since they themselves communicate in such high pitches. The head bonobo keeper, Mike Bates, learned about this, and I guess it tickled his interest. He approached me one day when I was photographing the bonobos and asked if I wanted to sing for bonobos. Well, of course I did!

*BCI: What was the reaction of the bonobos the first time you sang to them? Did they seem to enjoy it?*

K: I began with an aria that starts on a relatively high pitch ("Va, laisse couler mes larmes", from Werther by Massenet). The very first few seconds, the whole troop began vocalizing and seemed slightly alarmed, probably because they weren't sure if my singing was an aggressive act... they obviously hadn't experienced that before, so naturally must have been confused! But, what happened next was amazing! The matriarch, Loretta, called out to the rest of the troop, which calmed them down, she climbed up as close as possible to me on this tree stump, plopped down cradling her head and just watched me with such intensity! When I finished one aria, and there was a moment of silence, she gently gave me some hoots and nodded her head as if asking me to continue. So I sang them another aria and she just listened! The other bonobos were also gathered around watching me. So I had this audience of these beautiful bonobos, just sitting and watching and listening! I have no idea what they are thinking when I do this for them, but they do seem genuinely interested, curious and even excited.



Katarzyna with Makasi at the San Diego Zoo;  
Photo courtesy of Katarzyna Sadej



Makasi greeting Katarzyna at the San Diego Zoo;

*BCI: You have continued to sing to them after the initial experiment. What have you noticed about their behavior when you are singing? Do the bonobos seem to recognize you or anticipate your singing?*

K: I definitely developed closer bonds with a few of the individual bonobos since I began singing for them. They always seem to pay attention while I'm doing it, but what strikes me most is the reaction afterwards. When I return to the glass viewing area, after singing for them where the keepers do the food toss, a few of the bonobos will come up and tap the glass lightly with their knuckles, as if acknowledging me (if nothing else, it appears like gratitude, although we don't want to pretend like we know what they are

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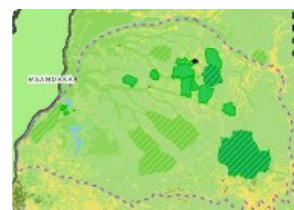


Photo courtesy of Katarzyna Sadej

thinking either). The sweetest thing I had noticed is that a couple of the individuals will approach me at the glass and press their ears to

the glass, as if they want to hear me sing to them.

*BCI: What do you personally take away from the experiences?*

K: It's incredible to "perform" for bonobos. I hope that it gives them something – some sort of enrichment. Even if it allows them to have something new to ponder on, that's a huge gift to me (just knowing that), because they deserve as much love and enrichment as they can get. From what I've observed, bonobos seem to like being entertained and seem to enjoy learning as much as humans do.

*BCI: Have any researchers studied your unique interactions with the bonobos?*

K: I am in touch with a primatologist and neuroscientist in the San Diego area about my interactions. Hopefully we can publish some sort of study on it in the future! It's still a fairly new thing, so we'll see where it goes and if we can learn anything new about bonobos through this. Perhaps I already have, but don't know it just yet – I have extensive notes on each singing interaction and a few of my personal non-singing interactions with the bonobos!

*BCI: BCI works to protect bonobos in the wild and preserve their habitat. We know you are passionate about bonobos and actively support conservation efforts. Will you share with us why you personally feel it is so important to protect this species?*

K: Humans are taking away more and more of the bonobos' natural habitat, through development, war and overpopulation – this is of course the case for so many animals and ecosystems on our planet. If things keep going the way they do, the only bonobos we'll be able to continue studying will be the captive ones. For me personally, I can't bear to imagine a world without bonobos, one of the most fascinating animals on earth. Most importantly, bonobos are arguably the animal we can relate to most.

*BCI: Anything else you'd like to add?*

K: I think that once humans begin to see bonobos as individuals, it makes a huge difference in how they are perceived and, ultimately, how they are treated. Many people visiting the zoo still refer to them as "monkeys" when passing by the exhibit. Monkeys are wonderful and intelligent in their own right, but when you are lucky enough to have a bonobo approach you and look you in the eye, you realize there is a sentient, incredibly intelligent, and gentle being in there that you inevitably want to get to know!

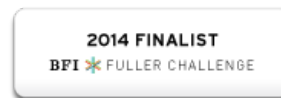
*Katarzyna is a mezzo-soprano who specializes in recital, opera and oratorio performance. She has performed internationally and is currently happily based in San Diego. When not performing as a professional she teaches voice and keeps a small studio of students in San Diego and remotely via Skype. Before she began training as a singer as a teenager, she applied and was accepted to the anthropology department at Carleton University in Ottawa. Interestingly had she not pursued her passion for singing, she would have become an anthropologist. So, her bonobo obsession (as she calls her "bonobobsession") makes perfect sense!*

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