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News from Falls Church's Sister City: Kokolopori Rainforest Reserve Officially Established

Community managed reserve protects more than 1000 bonobos and benefits local communities

FALLS CHURCH CITY, VIRGINIA, USA – The Kokolopori-Falls Church Sister City Partnership (KFCSCP) welcomes the official recognition of the Kokolopori Bonobo Reserve, a community managed rainforest reserve in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) which harbors one of the world's largest known populations of the endangered bonobo ape. Official establishment of the reserve offers national level legal protection for the traditional lands belonging to Falls Church's sister city, Kokolopori.

Officially announced by the KFCSCP's parent organization, the Bonobo Conservation Initiative (BCI), and the government of the DRC, the 1,847 square mile protected area exemplifies a new model for conservation. The Kokolopori Bonobo Reserve is the pilot site and model for the Bonobo Peace Forest, a proposed constellation of locally managed nature reserves supported by sustainable community development. The Kokolopori reserve provides essential ecosystem services, including biodiversity protection and carbon sequestration, to the world, including urban areas such as the Washington, DC, region where Falls Church is located. Kokolopori residents also benefit from the training, employment and community development programs associated with the reserve.

Located in the heart of Africa's Congo Basin rainforest, Kokolopori has been Falls Church's sister city since February 2006. Residents of Falls Church have initiated a cultural exchange program with Kokolopori and contributed substantially to improvements in the wellbeing of Kokolopori residents. Among other things, they have supported the community's new health clinic, donated school supplies, established a women's microcredit fund, and helped secure funding for Djolu Technical College, the only institute of higher education near Kokolopori.

“We are immensely proud of this successful trans-Atlantic collaboration to help our sister city protect their traditional lands for future generations,” says Ingrid Schulze, director and cofounder of the Kokolopori Falls Church partnership. “People in Falls Church benefit from tropical rainforests such as Kokolopori's, and we are in the unique position of being able to help our sister city secure legal rights over their traditional lands, improve the lives of their families, and fully participate in the stewardship of their forest for all of humanity.”

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On May 12, the American ambassador to the DRC, Bill Garvelink, and his wife Linda hosted a festive reception at their residence in Kinshasa to celebrate the Kokolopori reserve and the sister city partnership. The embassy reception was a great example of public diplomacy in action. Artworks of life in Kokolopori as imagined by Falls Church City students were exhibited at the reception and will be on long-term display at the American embassy and two Congolese universities. The Garvelinks are longtime residents of Falls Church and champions of the sister city concept. Linda Garvelink said, "The Ambassador and I hope Falls Church's model of global citizenship will inspire other American towns to bond with communities in the DRC."

Such international attention and support for rainforest and wildlife conservation also gives hope for the future to the people who are the ultimate stewards of Congo's magnificent forests. Rainforest communities like Kokolopori are among the most impoverished in the world, yet they provide great benefits to the world community. Sally Jewell Coxe, president and co-founder of BCI, says, "What is truly exceptional is how the Kokolopori Bonobo Reserve has inspired other communities in the bonobo habitat who have voluntarily initiated their own projects to protect their forest and bonobos."

The Kokolopori Reserve plays a crucial role in bonobo research and protection, as it is one of the only sites where wild bonobos are habituated to human presence and can be viewed on a daily basis. In danger of extinction, bonobos (*Pan paniscus*) were the last great ape to be discovered and are the least known great ape species. Found only in the DRC, bonobos are distinguished by their peaceful, cooperative, matriarchal society, their sexual nature and their remarkable intelligence. The Kokolopori reserve, like other tropical forests, is also considerably more effective in sequestering carbon than forests at temperate latitudes, carbon that would otherwise contribute to global climate change.

Albert Lotana Lokasola, president of the Kokolopori NGO, Vie Sauvage, and the initiator of the reserve project, says, "Since the time of our ancestors, our people, the Bongando, have traditionally protected and respected bonobos through taboos, legends and rituals celebrating bonobos as our closest relative and friend. Bonobos saved our ancestors from numerous dangers in the forest. We build on these traditions.... We hope that many people will come and visit Kokolopori to enjoy and work with us to strengthen the reserve." Lokasola, co-founder of the sister city partnership, will arrive in the U.S. for a visit to Washington, DC, and Falls Church on June 15.

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The Kokolopori-Falls Church Sister City Partnership (www.kokolopori-partnership.org) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization through our parent organization, the Bonobo Conservation Initiative (www.bonobo.org). All donations are tax-deductible.