WHEN SALLY JEWELL COXE was assigned to write copy for an upcoming book about a newly discovered species of the great ape, she had no inkling that it would take her on a path that would one day include teaching women in the Congo simple asanas.

The year was 1992, the book was about bonobos, a primate closely related to humans—we share 98.4 percent of our DNA with them—and the story of these peaceful animals captivated Coxe, then a 32-year-old staff writer at National Geographic Books. “Bonobos are matriarchal, they are cooperative, they are pansexual—they are almost the polar opposite of chimps,” she says. “The females are empowered, they make love not war, and they are the only primate other than humans that have sex not just for procreation. I was over-researched, but along the way had an epiphany that this was what I was supposed to do—work with these wonderful creatures.” At the time, little was known about bonobos.

She parlayed her connection with National Geographic into meeting the top people in the field, and by the next summer Coxe was a full-time volunteer at Georgia State University’s primate center where she was able to interact with bonobos up close and personal—as in play hide-and-seek with them, she recalls. “We interacted like friends—I found they really liked me,” she tells Yoga+ without a hint of embarrassment. How did she know? “We communicated through sign language, eye contact, body language. It was amazing to see how incredibly intelligent and sensitive they are—these are highly conscious beings.”

Even with our scratchy phone connection, her passion for these peaceful primates came through as she spoke from Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Two days later, she would leave for the bush to observe them with a small party of researchers and conservationists.

Coxe is founder and president of the Bonobo Conservation Initiative (BCI), dedicated to saving the “hippie” primate in its native habitat in the Congo Basin of the DRC, the only place in the world bonobos are found. This is no mean feat, as the rain forest—sometimes called our second lung by ecologists—is threatened by commercial logging and poachers with guns who freely roam the area. Though bonobos may be the species most closely related to humans, they are slain for bushmeat, or killed and dismembered for local rituals. Together, the logging and poaching has taken its deadly toll.

While civil strife in the area has made an accurate count impossible, it is generally accepted that the number of bonobos has declined from a robust 150,000 to 10,000 over the last three decades, according to the World Wildlife Fund. Coxe and her nonprofit organization, working hand in glove with the DRC government, are their last best hope against extinction. Most news from the DRC is not good; the current fighting there makes ugly headlines of rape and murder, but it is in the eastern part of the country bordering Rwanda and Uganda, some distance away from the Congo Basin and bonobo territory.

YOGA IN THE BUSH
Home base for Coxe and the BCI is Washington D.C., but she spends a good deal of time on-site in Africa. Coxe has
TWO SPECIES AT PLAY The Bonobo Peace Forest, started in 2002, is linking other community-protected areas with the new Sankuru Nature Preserve to secure habitat and halt ecocide.
been to the Congo Basin more times than she can readily count. It was there she saw that the women who regularly carry heavy bundles had numerous back problems. Aware that certain asanas would be beneficial, she began teaching them yoga. “I take out my mat and just do it,” she says. “They think it is very bizarre, but I tell them it will help their backs.” It helps that she speaks the native tongue, Lingala.

Yoga and meditation have been integral to Coxe’s spiritual path for decades. “Yoga is a part of who I am; I rely on yoga for my spiritual and physical health,” she explains. “I can’t imagine who I would be if I had never discovered it.” Coxe practices both hatha and kundalini yoga, as well as daily meditation—with Gene Nash, who at the time was running the Keshavasram International Center, a meditation center near Washington, D.C. (it’s now a peace center), was the key to saving a good-sized chunk of the forest. A few years ago, Nash remembers, Coxe was despondent that land would be lost to logging because she couldn’t raise the money to stop development there. Coxe expressed her dismay to Nash in a late-night phone call.

“I asked her how much money she needed, thinking it would be a few thousand, and she said, ‘Three hundred and fifty thousand,’ ” says Nash, who is known as Gita. “I knew in an instant how I would raise the money.” Nash had a 16-acre piece of property nearby in Warrenton, Virginia, and was pretty sure she had a willing buyer, a man who bred thoroughbreds on property that abutted hers. It was already early December; Coxe needed the cash in hand by the end of the year, not a day later. “I called him the next morning and told him the property was for sale but everything had to be settled by December 31st,” Nash says. “Nothing was smooth, various offices were closing for the Christmas holiday, there were many complications, but everybody collaborated and hours before the deadline, we had $330,000 shipped to the Congo to give to the man who owned the development rights. Loggers were already there and ready to go in. It was the most amazing synchronicity I have ever seen.”

Today bonobo reserves (which are also home to other rare species) in the rain forest cover more than 95,000 square miles, approximately 10 percent of the country and one of the largest contiguous land reserves left on earth. The eventual goal is to add another 5 percent to that, bringing the total to more than 15 percent of the DRC landmass. One reserve alone, the Sankuru, was established only late last year; encompassing more than 11,800 square miles, it is slightly larger in size than the state of Massachusetts. “We are not just saving bonobos, we are protecting the entire rain forest and ecosystem,” notes Michael Hurley, BCI executive director and Coxe’s partner. “The forest we are talking about is the second largest in the world, and as such, crucial to the survival of the planet—it sequesters huge amounts of carbon and releases oxygen.” The amount indeed is enormous: It is estimated that the Sankuru Reserve alone stores up to 660 million tons of carbon, which if released by deforestation would emit up to 2 billion tons of carbon dioxide, comparable to emissions from 38,000,000 cars per year for 10 years. The urgency to save the forest then is not just for our close relatives, the bonobos, and other species who live there, but for all of us. The very air the world breathes depends on it.

**AN INSPIRED LEADER**

Coxe’s reputation as a leading conservationist on a global scale is burnished by her selfless dedication. One of the world’s leading primatologists, Frans de Waal, director of the Living Links Center at the Yerkes National Primate Research Center of Emory University and author of several popular books, calls her the “perfect champion” of the endangered bonobos. “It takes enormous commitment to steer a project like this through its many hurdles, and shows how a handful of people led by an inspired leader can make a difference in the world,” he says. “A huge forest sanctuary may save thousands of these gentle, sexy apes within their home. They have found their perfect champion in the BCI and Sally Coxe.”

While Gita Nash’s expertise is not great apes, she is clear in her belief that Coxe is one of the people who is indeed a great champion of the planet: “Sally is not only a visionary, but she is changing the world. She is helping people to do things in a better way, she is inspiring people who live there, in the rain forest, to protect the forest themselves. She is utterly pure-hearted—she is almost selfless to the point where it is unfavorable to herself. She doesn’t think the way most people do.”

**HABITAT ENDANGERED**

While Coxe and the BCI, working hand in hand with the DRC government and local people, have already accomplished much, the fight to save the bonobos and their forest habitat is far from over. The
threat from logging companies is real and constant. “Logging means roads, roads make the forest more accessible to hunters,” BCI’s Hurley points out. “Logging camps provide ammo to the hunters who bring in bushmeat. Some of that ends up in London and the U.S. It’s not just bonobos who are threatened, all species are,” he says. “We could end up with the empty-forest syndrome. The forest might be there, but the wildlife will be wiped out.”

Ironically, the civil war and unrest that ravaged the country in the 1990s—4 million people died—worked in the bonobos’ favor, since the rain forest was left largely untouched during the strife. “Today they are threatened everywhere, except where we have been able to put in protections,” Coxe warns. “There is some poaching, even in places where the people’s ancestors were against hunting the bonobos. Because of the war, anybody with a gun can kill. Additionally, the war destroyed the infrastructure, and so there is no easy way to get one’s crops to the market. If it takes two weeks to get to the market to sell your goods, the only thing that will last is smoked meat, and that is another reason the hunting has escalated.”

And while there is a moratorium on logging now, illegal cutting continues, encroaching on the habitat of these peaceful primates—and the precious green canopy of trees.

While all indigenous people revere the bonobos, some tribes use their bones and ashes in rituals believed to bestow fertility or strength. But more common are legends that play on the interrelatedness of the two species—bonobo and humankind—and our indebtedness to the primate. “One myth begins with man and bonobo living together in the forest,” Coxe cheerfully recounts. “After raffia was planted, the fiber was spun into cloth, and the people used the cloth to cover themselves. But the bonobo was not there at the time, and when he came back, there was no cloth left. The bonobo said, I can’t be naked when everyone else has clothes, so they left to live in the forest.

“Another story has a man falling down in the forest, and a bonobo found him and thought he was sick. But the man was merely hungry. So the bonobo showed the man the different foods that he could eat in the forest. Many believe that the bonobo saved their ancestors, and never want to hurt them. Now that they see that the land will not be deforested, they say, See, the bonobo is saving us again.”

**SPIRITUAL BELIEFS AID CONSERVATION**

Coxe explains that the indigenous people revere the forest as their “mother,” or giver of life, and have long-standing systems in place to maintain its healthy balance, such as rules for hunting that allow populations of animals to regenerate. Some forests are considered sacred, where no hunting is permitted. “These deeply rooted spiritual beliefs and systems are incorporated into our conservation programs,” she says. “The time when you could go in and draw a line on a map is over.” Consequently, the BCI is a partnership between conservationists, the DRC government, and indigenous peoples, who are the on-site guards of the forest. Hurley notes that the guards’ salaries may be as little as $25 a month, but in a part of the world where the annual average income is $60 a year, that is a decent wage. The goal is always to have the grassroots organizations and communities take the lead in protecting not only the bonobos, but the entire ecosystem.

**It’s a rare piece of Congo good news: 10% of the country’s land is now a bonobo preserve, a precious 95,000 miles of rain forest.**

The need now is to find a way to give people a livelihood that does not destroy the forest, or harm the bonobo. Carbon credits are a possible answer, but figuring out the best way for using them—let alone implementing them—is still a ways off. “If you want to stop logging, you have to find something else that is just as profitable for the people,” she says, “and it’s not just in planting trees once an area has been logged.” The pristine rain forest is a source of many medicines as well as a huge ecological safety valve for the planet.

If we are all truly one world, we need to protect and maintain the health of our entire habitat. And that includes the rain forest where the bonobos—who are quite possibly our closest living relatives—freely roam.+