

Apes Gone Wild

The sweet sex lives of bonobos **BY AMY SCHNEIDER**

Having “hot animal sex” isn’t always a good thing. Take cats, for example. Male cats have spikes on their penises that bury into the vaginal wall during sex. Cats in heat aren’t yowling because they’re having a great time — it’s because they’re being stabbed by a barbed penis. And in the insect world, after praying mantises have sex, the female skips right past the pillow talk and bites the male’s head off if she’s hungry or stressed.

But then along comes an animal that actually makes humans look prudish and narrow-minded by comparison. In the rainforests of the Congo lives a species of great ape called the bonobo. These chimp-like animals spend their days roaming from tree to tree, wandering the forest in search of food. They also have a lot of sex.

In fact, they have sex on many occasions — when they find food, when they interact with their children and when they greet their friends. This lifestyle might sound bizarre to “civilized” ears, but it’s all part of the unique social structure that sets bonobos apart from chimpanzees and other great apes.

“For bonobos, it’s all to do with the importance of the bonding, not the importance of the sex,” says Frances White, an anthropology professor at the UO who has studied bonobos in the wild since 1983. “What bonobos are basically saying is that when something’s really important, and a friendship is crucial, then you have sex.”

Unlike chimpanzee societies, where aggressive males dominate passive females, bonobo societies consist of closely-bonded, unrelated females who use sex as a way to keep their friends close. By briefly engaging in sex with each other, female bonobos strengthen their connections, and in doing so, they tend to avoid violent behavior. Cliques of female

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PHOTO BY FRANCES WHITE

bonobos use their bonds to leverage their power against the males in their group, meaning male bonobos aren’t in total control. And when tensions rise, the bonobos simply have sex, which quickly restores the peace.

The sex is short and sweet — most encounters last less than 30 seconds. White says these sexual interludes occur between any combination of genders and ages. It’s common to see two females press against each other, face to face, and rub their vulvas together. Males will sometimes participate in the charmingly titled behaviors of “penis fencing” and “rump rubbing.” Of course, males and females have sex with each other as well, but mostly for the social benefits and not for making babies, unless the female is ovulating.

Still, life isn’t all about sexy time for the bonobos. “Females that don’t make friends are bullied by the males,” White says. “They’re still animals, and they have social strategies. It’s not as simple as the ‘hippie ape’ they often get called.”

Hippie ape or no, humanity could probably learn a thing or two from bonobos. It’s hard to imagine anyone wanting to harm these peaceful primates, but “bush meat” hunting and habitat destruction encroach on their existence. A world without bonobos is a world with less sex, and let’s face it — nobody wants that. ■

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