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Tusk Talks Podcast

Episode Three: A Different Path – Fanny Minesi

Fanny

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Bea

Welcome to Tusk Talks. I'm Bea Karanja and this is Tusk Talks, a podcast exploring the life stories and extraordinary experiences of Africa's most inspirational conservationists. Episode 3 – A Different Path.

Fanny Minesi rescues endangered bonobos from poachers, gives them sanctuary, and rewilds them in the rainforests of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Turning her back on a legal career to return to her roots in west Africa, Fanny is firm in her conviction that in order for conservation to be successful, local people must benefit from the sacrifices they make for conservation.

Working in conservation is profoundly complex, in a country like the DRC. Ravished by poverty, contending with Covid and Ebola outbreaks, insecurity, severe civil unrest, complicated logistics, and conflicting political agendas. Fanny is renowned for her adaptability and her for her collaboration with local communities and indigenous peoples.

I think you're going to find this episode fascinating – Fanny has the most incredible story to tell. Here we go.

Fanny Mbote

Fanny

Mbote.

Bea

For our listeners Fanny, what does that mean?

Fanny

Mbote, it means hi, hello in Ngala, which is one of the languages spoken in Congo. Congo is a very rich country with more than 300 language, but Ngala is one of the main languages.

Bea

Excellent, thank you Fanny! You've just come in from Congo, Fanny? So Tell us something amazing about Congo.

Fanny

Oh, wow, I can tell you so many amazing things about Congo. Something amazing about Congo is it's a land of opportunity, it's the land of solution, it's a land of hope. So because, you might think that Congo far away from your interests, but actually the Forest of Congo is very crucial for you.

Even if you live in London or in New York, our survival will be linked to how we protect this forest – it's the last lung of our planet. Congo is… it depends how you want to see it, it's either the land of the solution, or either the last forest for us.

Bea

Fantastic Fanny, I think you are so correct, especially when you talk about Congo being the land of hope. I've been to Congo and I couldn't agree with you more – as it is the last lungs there is a lot that we have to do to support you to keep it that way right. So, tell me how did you get into what you do, who inspired you, what inspired you to do the amazing work that you do?

Fanny

So my family lived there for many generations. My dad is coming from there. My mum grew up in Congo, so that was my world and my family was always involved in nature protection, conservation. And when she was forty years old, I was a young child, I was eight or something like that. For the first time my mum crossed the road of one bonobo, and this is how the story started. She has dedicated her life to protect those animals and that was really inspiring for me as a kid to see that she had no doubt, never. She didn't know how, but she was sure on the goal. She never doubted, and growing up around parents who live for what they think they have to fight for, it was really inspiring. I think my mom had a lot to do with what informed my dedication to bonobos in nature.

Bea

That for sure is you know no one would doubt that I mean if they could only just meet you and see you, I can for one just see it coming through you when you talk about them. So tell us and tell our listens about bonobos, why are they so special?

Fanny

So bonobos are not really well known, you know, Congo is difficult to go.

Back in the day our country was named Zaire and politically unstable. So it was difficult to organise research over there. So for years, the researcher were thinking that they were in front of chimp and the bonobos were not known for so many and we're talking about decades long, and they are so different from the chimps and from other great apes. Usually when you see great apes, you see a big male surrounded by his family and all the power is concentrated in one hand.

This is completely different from bonobos society. Bonobos lead by the females, but not by one female who concentrates all the powers. The magic is they share the power between other females and they also are very well known as hippies, they call them hippies of the Forest, because bonobos have sexual contact and you have to understand it as it's like a handshake.

They use sex contact to reduce tension, to bond and they don't care about gender, ages and also in the whole world, this is the only animals that doesn't kill each other. So they have conflict, of course, being in a society is having conflict, but they never solve the conflict by killing another bonobo. It's really rare.

Bea

Hah so it's almost like a democracy?

Fanny

It's matriarchal. So the sons never left their moms. You have the place in the hierarchy coming from your mom and yes it's lead by the female. So, I won't say that its Democratic because they don't vote - I'm sure the males are not really, really happy about it. But it's working. It's a peaceful society, a peaceful society - they're not territorial.

Bea

Wow so they don’t fight for and or space or females?

Fanny

Exactly. The females are always ready, they don’t have a season like with dogs or chimps. The female’s always ready to have sex.

Bea

That is fascinating, so that's the social structure that you see. That's automatic from generation to generation of bonobos, or does it go off pest at all?

Fanny

If your mom is the leader, then you’re leader.

Bea

Wow, That's amazing. That's fantastic. Which leads nicely to my next point, which I know you don't like talking about, but I think we need to talk about it, which is the role of women in conservation in Africa.

Fanny

I’m not…Just let me be clear about this it's not that that I don't like to talk about women.

I think sometimes what we are doing is seen by the other just with those glasses. Like sometimes you do things because you are a human being, you're not doing things because you are a woman. I was wondering, do people ask that to a man? Sometimes I'm wondering. So, I'm totally aware about the challenges we are facing as women and especially in Africa and especially in conservation.

I am aware of that. And yes, I'm happy. I'm happy to… How can I say that? I'm happy to… I don't pay attention to this, I don’t pay attention to where I'm supposed to stop. I just take my way and I bring my girls with me.

Bea

Excellent. Bring them forth. Definitely. Let's lead the charge. But I think it's interesting that you say that because it is something that I like to question a lot. Do we talk about it? How do we talk about it? When do we talk about it? And whom do we talk about it, too? Because I feel sometimes it's like an echo chamber and then sometimes you can hit the spot with just one thing you say.

So I think it's something that will always be discussing and it will ebb and flow. But your team on the ground are predominantly women and they understand that you'll be expanding your point, so to

speak, into Europe and other places with those teams also predominantly led by women. So what is driving that?

Fanny

Women are able to over-pass themselves and especially when you work in conservation in challenging countries like DRC can be, when you when you have these challenges as a woman, the challenge in conservation is just another one and it gives you this force, and to be brave enough to go and try in front of males and patriarchy and traditional, it's very difficult sometimes because, you know, we work into the forest –

We have two sides, right? We have the project where we rehabilitate bonobos, we rescue them. We rehabilitate them in the centre. They are orphans. Their mothers were killed to be eaten. And we rescued those orphans. We rehabilitate them and then they recreate families, they recreate groups. And then after those groups are reintroduced into a protected area, this protected area is very different from the other protected areas in Congo because they are managed with the local communities.

And it means that you are putting the traditional power at the same level that administration power and traditional power is really old men rules, right? So sometimes, as a woman, I also push to decide to make sure that we don't fall to the excess of the traditional power. You know what I mean? Working separately with the women just to verify, is this your ideal? Does this direction reflect what you think for your land because you have rights.

This balance - it's really difficult to preserve it because traditional power and also the minority power - young men and women. So yeah it takes a lot of different ingredients to make it work and it takes time also. And it's a slow process and it's very, what we say in French, Artisanal, by hand, right? Because we are literally creating our own rules, working with the people who lives over there with their own rules, their own challenges, and sometimes even the women they're like, 'we're not allowed to say this', we're not asking you to say it in front of everybody, but we want to make sure that the direction we're taking is okay for you and for your daughters. Sometimes it's harder for them to talk about themself, but it's easier to talk about their daughters.

Bea

Exactly. Exactly. And that's the thing, You know, it's just understanding that a lot of these things are evolutionary. And however, we can bring in the different voices, whether it's gathering from the side and then bringing them into the fold as a whole. I think it's important that we all look to ensure that every voice is heard and that you're not going to get a perfect solution for everybody.

But as perfect as it can be for everybody who needs it. And that's the importance. I think if we look back at the bonobos structure, as you've just explained it to us, if we can only take from that and maybe we should all start looking to nature to determine our way of being, our way of existence and learn from nature.

Fanny

This is also why I'm scared that they disappear, because, honestly, they should inspire how we manage our own society. I mean, they're not territorial - we are, we fight for a piece of land. We are not sharing the power. By definition, making a good decision is a decision made by someone who concentrates the power, it's totally different from our society.

And if we continue, we're going to lose the bonobos. We're going to lose them. In three generations, the scientists says there's no more bonobo into the world, so we have to do something. We have the responsibility to do something for this creature because they are fascinating. They are! We have so many things to learn from them.

And it's true. We are duplicating, in a way, what we learned from the bonobos. And it is I'm telling you, it's not easy. It's not easy because we are not used to share, we are not to use to share the decision. Trying to manage this protected area, being inclusive, trying to make everybody have the right to say what is seems to be good for them. - This is the most challenging thing that I'm doing. I think, honestly, like recreating a place where everybody can speak and have the right to say, 'I'm not okay with this'. It's difficult even to make you say it in front of others.

Bea

Very difficult, very difficult. And I think it's not just saying it, it's just going and doing it is as well. So, it's one thing to say, but it's another thing to have the courage. And fotitude to go and do it.

Fanny

We tried hard and a lot of money went into protected areas in conservation and biodiversity. What is the result?

I mean, we can discuss about it. So, we have to try different ways and we have to stop putting the human in the centre of the problem. You have to look for solution. So, protecting the nature is not against the human being, it's for us. We have to learn to live all together and to balance that. And I'm telling you, the Congo have a very difficult choice because now we feel like the North countries are not ready to change the way they do things.

They're not ready for change, but they are expecting countries like Congo to take the responsibility to protect those forests for all of us. Right. But no one is ready to change. Do you think that's normal? Our country is facing… I have to develop my country. My people are struggling. There poverty, there's so many challenges, but I have the responsibility for my planet, no pressure, for my species, no pressure, to protect this. It's a very difficult choice. So, let's be very, very honest here. If the world is not ready to change, it's not only us who will take the responsibility for the failure. It's all of us. It's not a Congolese responsibility.

Bea

So hopefully, Fanny, if we listen to what you've got to say and take it in wholeheartedly and live by your example, I think we'll be on a good track. But the most important thing, as we've just said, is the trying. It's good to have the ideas and the passion and everything, but the most important thing is the trying.

Fanny

We are so little, you know so little so lets try.

Bea

It's a collective management of responsibility. At the end of the day, I think I was talking to one of our colleagues earlier and it baffles me. It really does. How we can be watching the world crack and not be running to get out the Band-Aids, the plasters and the bandages. You know, my mother always used to say to me, the best that you can do is try.

So Fanny, tell me a fun fact about bonobos.

Fanny

A fun fact about bonobos and not talk about sex? I mean no, they are fascinating. You know what is really difficult for me sometimes not comparing them to our species - this is a thing that I have to work on myself you know what I mean? I have to not project things on them.

Yeah, but it's true for us coming from our society, seeing this society, sharing the power, lead by the females, not having any rules about sexual contact like males and males, young and old. And there's no rule besides, we take what we need so we don't compete for the land. If there is enough food, we share the land. If there is no more food than you spread.

Bea

So I guess it's a bit like 19720s Woodstock without the drugs, hey

Fanny

This is why they call them the hippies. Maybe they'll take some leaves, I don't know about that, but yeah, this is why they call them the hippies of the forest.

Bea

That's excellent. My God, FAnny, I really need to come and see, see the bonobos and you in situ and in the field. I've been in the Congo many, many years ago when I was a journalist running around with rebel leaders and covering various insurgencies as a journalist. But I now need to come and spend some time with the bonobos and learn about their structures and do some nice things and spend some time taking care of them with you will.

Fanny

You will discover another Congo. You know, Congo is really big it's like Continental. Congo is the size of Europe. So, imagine the diversity of the culture. There's so many ways of celebrating joy,

celebrating death, celebrating union. It's a rich country. It's a wonderful country. I wish. I wish. It's true we're facing huge challenges because unfortunately, we are a rich country - the land is really rich. But still, nobody is taking advantage of this. Sometimes I wish we had nothing. You know, honestly, sometimes I wish we had nothing.

Bea

mmm I think, you know, if I look back at my time, one of my most memorable moments or times as a journalist was navigating that immense river Congo in the tiny little plane we went from, but we went from [Location in DRC] to Beni and then from Beni to Entebbe. But it was just it was amazing. It was absolutely amazing.

Fanny

[Location in DRC] is very close to the release site. [Location in DRC] is north and we are just down the road.

Bea

Mmm yeah and when I was in Congo, I mean I tell you, just traveling through this thick jungle, I mean it's forests like I've never seen to the point where traversing through Congo, I felt like a modern day explorer.

Fanny

You see, it's one of the places when you sit there you feel like nothing has changed for so many years. You know what I mean? You have this forest, deep forest. We talk forest. We do not talk about the Lion King, you know, talk about forest where you sit here I cannot see her.

The team working there are so brave. You have those black rivers, black black reflecting the forest, it's one of the most beautiful places in the world. Very difficult to go to - You don't visit Congo, you know, you have to be invited to go in Congo. You don't go in Congo, you have to be invited. Right.

Bea

Ha so it's a date.

Fanny

It's a date. I'm waiting for you.

Bea

Excellent. Excellent. Fanny, I can't wait. I honestly cannot wait to meet to come and see you, meet the team, interact and engage with the bonobos. I really can't wait. And until then, I can just say it was fantastic. It was such a joy to talk to you.

Fanny

Thank you for having me. Thank you for your concern. Thank you for your interest for bonobos, for the forest, for countries like us and you know, we don't do this for this. We don't. We don't work every day for this attention. But it's nice to feels that people are concerned. You're not alone and people want to be part of this. So, I'm happy I'm happy to speak more about bonobos. I'm happy to make you discover this fascinating species and to talk about my country.

Bea

Thanks for listening to Just Talks stories from Africa's Conservation voices.

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