

Dr. Elizabeth Lonsdorf

Elizabeth Lonsdorf's original interest was in marine mammals – particularly dolphins. As a student, she secured an internship in the Animal Cognition department of the Kewalo Basin Marine Mammal Laboratory in Honolulu, Hawaii, assisting in research projects and participating in animal training and husbandry. Lonsdorf also acted as a research assistant in Marine Mammal Research at Walt Disney World's EPCOT Center. There, she assisted in planning, maintaining, and demonstrating a marine mammal cognition research project. In her graduate school search, however, Lonsdorf learned of the Jane Goodall Institute's Center for Primate Studies at the University of Minnesota. Intrigued by the possibility of traveling to Tanzania to study chimpanzees in the wild, Lonsdorf decided to pursue her Ph.D. in Minnesota, with Dr. Anne Pusey, Director of the Center for Primate Studies, as her principal supervisor.

A North Carolina native and a Duke University graduate, Lonsdorf has spent several months per year studying wild chimpanzees at Gombe Stream National Park in Tanzania since 1998. She specializes in young chimp development, focusing on the acquisition of foraging skills. At the heart of Lonsdorf's study is the question of how young chimps learn the complex foraging skills of their community. Dr. Jane Goodall first observed chimpanzees using tools when she witnessed them using sticks to extract termites from mounds in the earth. Lonsdorf has spent her time at Gombe studying this practice intently: Are the offspring of skilled tool users adept because they learn by watching their skillful mothers, or do they simply learn to “fish” at termite mounds by individual trial and error? Lonsdorf's research has suggested that good “termite fishing” skills may run in families.

Expanding on world-famous researcher Goodall's observations of tool use in wild chimpanzees at Gombe, Lonsdorf is the first researcher to quantify measures of individual

differences in tool using skill and technique. She represents a new generation of researchers who use technology to continue in the path of the research pioneers like Goodall.

Elizabeth earned her Ph.D. in spring of 2003 and went on to become Director of Field Conservation at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, facilitating the Zoo's involvement in animal conservation projects around the globe.

In 2004, Elizabeth was honored to be named to National Geographic's Emerging Explorers Program.

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