

Conservation news

International workshop to develop a conservation action plan for the Critically Endangered cao vit gibbon *Nomascus nasutus*

On 17–19 March 2021, Fauna & Flora International (FFI)–Vietnam Programme, in collaboration with Cao Bang Provincial Forest Protection Department (Viet Nam), Bangliang National Nature Reserve (Guangxi, China), Daji Nature and the IUCN Species Survival Commission Conservation Planning Specialist Group, organized an international workshop to develop a 10-year species conservation action plan and a 30-year vision to 2050 for the Critically Endangered cao vit gibbon *Nomascus nasutus*. The workshop engaged 85 multi-level government representatives, protected area managers, international experts and NGO representatives who gathered physically in two workshop hubs, in Hanoi, Viet Nam, and Guangxi, China, and in a shared virtual space. The workshop was trilingual, with participants contributing in Vietnamese, Mandarin or English. The first day of the workshop was dedicated to presentations on the gibbon's ecology, behaviour and population dynamics, and implications for conservation. Delegates then worked on a vision of what successful conservation of the cao vit gibbon would entail, examined current threats and brainstormed specific action points to address these threats in the next 10 years.

The cao vit gibbon is endemic to forest habitats on the Sino–Vietnamese border. It was believed to have been formerly widespread in northern Viet Nam and southern China but was considered extinct by the latter half of the 20th century. The species was rediscovered in the Cao Bang forest in 2002 by FFI experts, who recorded > 20 individuals. In 2006, the species' presence was confirmed in the same forest in Guangxi, China. Protected areas were gazetted to protect the species: the Cao Vit Gibbon Species and Habitat Conservation Area (Trung Khanh, Cao Bang, Viet Nam) and Bangliang National Nature Reserve (Jingxi, Guangxi, China). Monitoring since 2007 indicates the population is now stable at c. 120 individuals, and this is thought to be at or near the carrying capacity of the species' current habitat.

The workshop was not only an opportunity to reflect on past conservation actions—ranging from population monitoring and habitat restoration to law enforcement and community outreach—but also served as a platform for discussion of coordination among protected area managers, conservationists and academics, and across the international border. The main outcome of the workshop will be an update of the 2015–2020 action plan, with a new species conservation action plan for 2021–2030. The vision for the species reflects the consensus that the risk of

extinction is now low in its last remaining home, and that the long-term priority is recovery, by exploring establishment of a second wild population.

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The future of Indonesian gibbons: challenges and recommendations

Indonesia is home to nine species of small apes, all of which are categorized as Endangered on the IUCN Red List but conservation efforts for them have been limited. To address this, Perhimpunan Ahli dan Pemerhati Primata Indonesia (an Indonesian primatology association) held a webinar series during November–December 2020 to update information on the ranges of these species on Java, Sumatra (including Mentawai) and Borneo.

For the silvery gibbon *Hylobates moloch* there has been long-term behavioural research in Gunung Halimun Salak National Park, West Java, and a community livelihood-based conservation programme has been initiated outside the protected areas of Central Java. Nevertheless, the species' range is fragmented, and habitat corridors thus need to be developed, and law enforcement and a behavioural change strategy are required to counter illegal trade of this species.

The major threats to gibbons on Sumatra and Mentawai are habitat fragmentation and disease. The siamang *Symphalangus syndactylus*, agile gibbon *Hylobates agilis*, and lar gibbon *Hylobates lar* are known to occur in fragmented forests, but the degree of population persistence remains unknown, and there has been an outbreak of scabies in a siamang population. Corridors need to be included in land-use planning for these species, and research on disease outbreak risks is needed. Information on the status of these species is outdated, although there has been a recent survey of Kloss's gibbon *Hylobates klossii*.

There are two main issues for the conservation of gibbons on Borneo. Firstly, although the Bornean *Hylobates muelleri* and Bornean white-bearded *Hylobates albibarbis* gibbons are on the Indonesian protected species list, the northern gray *Hylobates funereus* and Abbott's gray *Hylobates abbotti* gibbons are not listed. Secondly, these four species occur mostly outside protected areas, on private and community-owned lands, and thus there needs to be multi-stakeholder engagement for the development of a conservation strategy.

To improve the conservation of Indonesia's gibbons, Perhimpunan Ahli dan Pemerhati Primata Indonesia, with the support of the Indonesian government, plans to design a policy brief and conduct a conservation planning workshop.

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The roaming wild Asian elephants of Yunnan, China, pose a challenge to conservation

In early 2020, 16 wild Asian elephants *Elephas maximus*, an iconic species of the tropical forest of South-east Asia and a First Category Key Protected Wild Animal Species in China, left the tropical forests of Xishuangbanna National Nature Reserve in Yunnan Province, on the China–Laos–Myanmar border, and headed northwards through a heavily modified

anthropogenic landscape (see map below). The herd reached Pu'er City by March 2020, and Mojiang County by December 2020, where a calf was born. On 17 April 2021, the now 17 elephants reached Yuanjiang County, from where two of them returned to Mojiang County. In late April, these two elephants were still wandering in the Ning'er County of Pu'er City. By 27 May the herd of 15 elephants had reached Eshan County, only 120 km from Kunming City.

By the mid 20th century the Asian elephant had been almost extirpated in China as large areas of tropical forest were logged. Most of the remaining elephants lived in the 24,000 km² Xishuangbanna Reserve, established in 1986. In the early 1990s, these elephants, which had grown to a population of c. 300, expanded their range northwards to Pu'er City, with some elephants settling in this hilly landscape interspersed with farmlands, tea gardens and secondary forests. Elephants from the Reserve are now apparently heading even further north, causing considerable disturbance as they journey. The wildlife management authority is monitoring the elephants with drones, where necessary warning local residents of the impending arrival of the herd. The herd has now moved a total of c. 500 km and is still on the move, reaching Jining District of Kunming City on 1 June.

Meanwhile, another herd, of 17 elephants, left the Mengyang area of Xishuanbanna Reserve and approached the Xishuanbanna Botanic Garden of the Chinese Academy of Sciences on 23 May 2021, where elephants were extirpated 70 years ago. These elephants are foraging in the part of the Garden used for ex situ conservation of rare crops. Part of the Garden has been closed and staff are monitoring the elephants with drones.

These two herds of Asian elephants pose a new challenge for conservation in China. In addition to investigating why elephants are leaving Xishuangbanna National Nature Reserve and to considering a new action plan for Asian elephant conservation in the country, we need to ensure the safety of people in the areas through which the elephants pass, and that of these roaming elephants.

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