

Chapter 24

Saving the Small Apes: Conservation Assessment of Gibbon Species at the 2006 Asian Primate Red List Workshop

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The body of work assembled in this volume makes it clear that gibbons play an important ecological role in their environment, but unfortunately both gibbons and their habitats are in decline throughout their distribution range. Understanding the threats to wild populations is an important first step in conservation planning. In September 2006, several gibbon researchers were invited to participate in the Asian Primate Red List Workshop in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Thomas Geissmann has prepared an excellent report of the results of this workshop as it pertains to gibbons (Geissmann 2007), and I will only summarize the overall conclusions of the workshop in this chapter.

The researchers who assessed the status of gibbons at the Workshop included Noviar Andayani, Bill Bleisch, Warren Y. Brockelman, Thomas Geissmann, Colin P. Groves, Nguyen Manh Ha, Saw Htun, Long Yongcheng, Eric Meijaard, Sanjay Molur, Vincent Nijman, Ben Rawson, Matt Richardson, Jatna Supriatna, Carl Traeholt, Rob Timmins, Joe Walston, Danielle J. Whittaker, and Jiang Xuelong. The assessments resulting from the Workshop appear in the 2008 version of the IUCN Red List.

The World Conservation Union's Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN 2008) is a comprehensive review of threatened taxa across the globe. The categories for taxa that have been evaluated and for which sufficient data exist are, in increasing order of risk, Least Concern (LC), Near Threatened (NT), Vulnerable (VU), Endangered (EN), Critically Endangered (CE), Extinct in the Wild (EW), and Extinct (EX). The criteria used to define each category include small or declining population size and small or declining geographic range; details and guidelines are described in the IUCN's Red List Categories and Criteria (version 3.1: IUCN 2001).

Sixteen purported species of gibbons were assessed at the workshop, three of which were divided into a total of 12 subspecies. The new status assessments for each taxon are summarized in Table 24.1, with the previous assessments (2003

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Table 24.1 Previous (2000, 2003) and most recent (2006) Red List assessments of gibbon taxa

Taxon	Previous assessment	2006 assessment
<i>Hoolock hoolock</i>	EN	EN
<i>Hoolock leuconedys</i>	EN	VU
<i>Hylobates agilis</i>	LR/NT	EN
<i>Hylobates albibarbis</i>	LR/NT	EN
<i>Hylobates klossii</i>	VU	EN
<i>Hylobates lar</i>	LR/NT	EN
<i>H. l. yunnanensis</i>	CR	DD ¹
<i>H. l. vestitus</i>	LR/NT	EN
<i>H. l. lar</i>	LR/NT	EN
<i>H. l. entelloides</i>	LR/NT	VU
<i>H. l. carpenteri</i>	LR/NT	EN
<i>Hylobates moloch</i>	CR	EN
<i>Hylobates muelleri</i>	LR/NT	EN
<i>H. m. muelleri</i>	LR/NT	EN
<i>H. m. funereus</i>	LR/NT	EN
<i>H. m. abbotti</i>	LR/NT	EN
<i>Hylobates pileatus</i>	VU	CR
<i>Nomascus concolor</i>	EN	CR
<i>N. c. concolor</i>	EN	CR
<i>N. c. fuvogaster</i>	CR	CR
<i>N. c. jingdongensis</i>	CR	CR
<i>N. c. lu</i>	EN	CR
<i>Nomascus gabriellae</i>	VU	EN
<i>Nomascus leucogenys</i>	EN	CR
<i>Nomascus siki</i>	DD	EN
<i>Nomascus nasutus</i>	CR	CR
<i>Nomascus hainanus</i>	CR	CR
<i>Symphalangus syndactylus</i>	LR/NT	EN

¹ More recent data suggest that this subspecies may already be extinct (see text). CR, critically endangered; DD, data deficient; EN, endangered; LR/NT, Low Risk/Near Threatened; VU, Vulnerable. The category "Low Risk" was abandoned by the IUCN in 2003.

for *Nomascus nasutus* and *N. hainanus*; 2000 for all other species) for comparison. In cases where the taxonomy has changed between assessments (i.e., *Bunopithecus hoolock* is now *Hoolock hoolock*; *Nomascus leucogenys siki* is now *Nomascus siki*), only the new taxonomic name is given.

The current situation of the small apes is dire. Of the 28 taxa assessed, 19 (68%) increased in threat level by one or two categories since the previous assessment. Only two decreased in threat level; for the Javan gibbon, *H. moloch*, this change was due to the availability of better information, not due to an actual decrease in threat. Eight of the 28 taxa (29%) are considered Critically Endangered, while another 17 taxa (61%) are categorized as Endangered and two are considered Vulnerable (7%). No taxa are in the lower-risk categories of Least Concern or Near Threatened.

In the 2000 assessment, the Yunnan white-handed gibbon, *H. lar yunnanensis*, was categorized as Critically Endangered; at the 2006 workshop, this subspecies was considered Data Deficient. Since the workshop, a team of scientists conducted a survey in China's Yunnan Province throughout this taxon's known range. The team concluded that this gibbon subspecies is locally extinct in China and that, unless populations have survived in neighboring Myanmar, it is likely to be globally extinct (Holden 2008; Müller 2008). Gibbons have had a prominent role in Chinese art and literature for more than two millennia (Van Kulik 1967). The extinction of the white-handed gibbon in China therefore represents an incalculable loss not only to biodiversity but also to the Chinese cultural heritage. Two other taxa in China are also on the edge of extinction: only about 50 Cao-Vit crested gibbon (*Nomascus nasutus*) individuals remain in China and Vietnam, and the Hainan crested gibbon (*N. hainanus*) population has been reduced to fewer than 20 individuals (Mittermeier et al. 2007). These gibbons are, by far, the most endangered apes on the planet.

While gathering data is critical to defining conservation needs, and further information about the status of many gibbon populations is still urgently required, research is only a first step. We must do more. It is our hope that publications such as this volume will contribute to a greater public interest in saving these wonderful animals, as well as providing encouragement and support for conservation professionals and gibbon researchers and enthusiasts already working to develop effective conservation policies. It may be too late for some populations and taxa, but others can and should be saved. If we are to have any hope of bringing the small apes with us into the next century, the time for action is now.

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