

Hoolock Gibbon makes the World's 25 Most Endangered Primates List

The first "Top 25 most endangered primates" list, according to Anthony Rhylands, was to promote public awareness on behalf of primates of the world, many of which are Critically Endangered and Endangered today according to the IUCN Red List. The "list" was brought out by the IUCN SSC Primate Specialist Group of IUCN to coincide with the end of a century that, oddly, had not endured any primate extinctions but in which the plight of primate populations became worrisome, to say the least. It was to recognise the fact that research and education were critically important in order to save the world's primates. The list was covered widely and dramatically in the media. Some of the listed primates received much more conservation and research attention from being listed.

In 2002 the list was updated and released at the 19th Congress of the International Primatological Society (IPS) in Beijing, China. Field biologists from the forests of China, with mud on their boots and ticks in their armpits, contributed information from their studies, Rhylands commented. These contributions culminated in the official endorsement by the International Primatological Society of the Top 25. With this meeting the list became a joint endeavor of the Primate Specialist Group, IPS and Conservation International. In the next biennial meeting in August 2004, which was the 20th Congress of IPS in Torino, Italy, came revision 3.

More recently, in July 2006, in Uganda, Africa the 21st IPS meeting endorsed the fourth list of 25 Most Endangered Primates of the world which will be announced in the next issue of the IPS Journal. One of India's and Bangladesh's favourite animals and South Asia's only made it onto this list, the Western Hoolock Gibbon, *Hoolock hoolock*. Not that this is some kind of honour, in fact, just the opposite. The presence of any species on this list is an alarm call for the country or countries which enjoy the presence of these species better wake up and get into action to avoid an extinction.

Much work has been done in the last three years to draw attention to the Western Hoolock Gibbon and the presence of this species on this high profile list is a last ditch effort to make governments of the two South Asian countries which are familiar to us, sit up and take notice.

The Hoolock Gibbon "nomination" was put up and defended by Sally Walker, Coordinator of the IPS South Asian Network. Many events have been organised for this species ... a PHVA, six educator training workshops, a husbandry training for Indians by CZA and soon a translocation training by ZOO. We hope all this activity will result in the species being removed from the list. We are taking the liberty of including what we sent to PSG, IPS & CI editor for inclusion in the announcement.

Western Hoolock Gibbon, *Hoolock hoolock* (Harlan, 1831), Bangladesh, India, Myanmar (2006)

The Hoolock Gibbon was formerly in the genus *Bunopithecus* with just one species and two subspecies: *B. hoolock hoolock*, the Western Hoolock Gibbon, and *B. hoolock leuconedys* Groves, 1967, the eastern hoolock gibbon from Myanmar and China. Mootnick and Groves (2005) informed that name *Bunopithecus* was not valid, and placed it in a new genus, *Hoolock*, and at the same time argued that the two forms were distinct species (but see Mootnick 2006). The Western Hoolock Gibbon (*Hoolock hoolock*) occurs in Bangladesh, northeastern India and western Myanmar, west of the Chindwin River. Its range in Myanmar, known from just a few field studies and mostly informal sightings, is restricted to the western parts, delineated from the populations of *Hoolock leuconedys* by the Chindwin River as far as the head waters in the north. In India and Bangladesh its range is strongly associated with the occurrence of contiguous canopy, broad-leaved, wet evergreen and semi-evergreen forests. The species is an important seed disperser, its diet including mostly ripe fruits, with some flowers, leaves and shoots.

Western Hoolock Gibbons face numerous threats in the wild, and are now entirely dependent on human action for their survival. The debilitating threats include habitat encroachment to accommodate ever-growing human populations and immigration, forest clearance for tea cultivation, the practice of *jhuming* (slash-and-burn cultivation), hunting for food and "medicine", capture for trade, the degradation and decline in quality of their forests that impacts fruiting trees, canopy cover and the viability of their home ranges. Isolated populations face the additional threats arising from the intrinsic effects of small populations. Some populations surviving in just a few remaining trees are subjected to harassment by locals and to lack of food, and are attacked by dogs while attempting to cross clearings between forest patches.

Based on habitat loss over the last 30-40 years, Western Hoolock Gibbons are estimated to have declined from more than 100,000 (Assam state alone was estimated to have around 80,000 in the early 1970s) to less than 5,000 individuals (a decline of more than 90%). The species was known to occur in good numbers in contiguous forests, which have borne the brunt of persistent human impacts. Isolated forest fragments hold just some few families of numbers insufficient for survival in the mid-to long-term. Apart from some border forests between India and Myanmar, the remaining habitat is fragmented, holding minimal populations of this sort. We have documented the extirpation of

Western Hoolock Gibbons from 18 locations over the last 3–5 years; eight in Bangladesh and 10 in India. Bangladesh has about 200 Western Hoolock Gibbons in 22 separate locations, twenty of which have less than 20 individuals each: 17 of these have less than 15 individuals, and 14 have less than 10 individuals. About 100 locations with Hoolock Gibbons have been recorded in India; 77 have less than 20 individuals, and 47 of these have less than 10 individuals. The Population Viability Analysis (PVA) predicts a 95% decline in the population in Bangladesh and a 75% decline in the population in India over the next two decades based on the current effects of human impacts and the intrinsic factors acting on very small and isolated populations. The population in Myanmar has not been surveyed. West of the Ayeyarwaddy-Chindwin River, there is about 50,000 km² of forest in the Rakhine Yoma region, but much of it is degraded and hunted. The area includes the Rakhine Yoma Elephant Range (about 175,500 ha), managed by the Nature and Wildlife Conservation Division of the Forest Department of Myanmar, in Rakhine State, in the lower part of the country (about 17°N). There are other forested areas farther to the north, including the Chin Hills Complex and the Naga Hills area, but they are considered unsafe for travelers. No published information is available on the current range and status of the Western Hoolock in Myanmar. The population trends observed over recent years in Bangladesh and northeast India indicate a very rapid decline in numbers and immediate measures are required by their governments, forest departments, local communities and NGOs.
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