

Last chance for the Hainan Gibbon

In the 1950s more than 2000 Hainan gibbons resided in over 8600 km² of forests across the tropical island of Hainan, China.¹ Through forest clearance and hunting the population fell steeply. Based on a comprehensive survey in October 2003, and subsequent monitoring, no more than 20 remain,² restricted to a 16 km² patch of forest in Bawangling National Nature Reserve. Density is low, in part because the high-elevation (800-1300m) forest is suboptimal; downhill it is bordered with pine plantation and degraded shrubland.¹ A Conservation Action Plan drafted in late 2003 outlined various key priorities, such as protecting and monitoring gibbons, engaging local communities, restoring habitat, and building staff capacity. Various organisations have contributed to these actions, but much remains to be done.

There are currently two social groups containing nine and six individuals respectively, and a number of solitary individuals.² Population recovery will be constrained by habitat availability and continuity. Thus harvesting of resin in the adjacent pine plantations has ceased, and an urgent effort is under way to expand suitable forest, which takes some 15 years to grow to usable height.

This year the Primate Society of Great Britain has selected the Hainan gibbon reforestation project as the recipient of funds generated through member donations.



Photo 1. Female Hainan gibbon cradling her juvenile. Currently only three breeding females survive. Young are born with a light coat that changes to black at around 1-2 years. In females, it changes back to a lighter colour between the ages of 5 and 8. Males remain black (Photo 4). © Lee Kwok Shing/KFBG

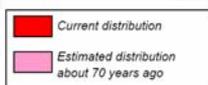


Fig. 2. Map showing current and past distribution of eastern *Nomascus* (crested) gibbons.¹ Point 1: Eastern black crested gibbon *N. nasutus*. Around 40 remain in the wild, on the Vietnam-China (Guangxi) border. Point 2: Hainan gibbon *N. hainanus*. Only 20 remain today.

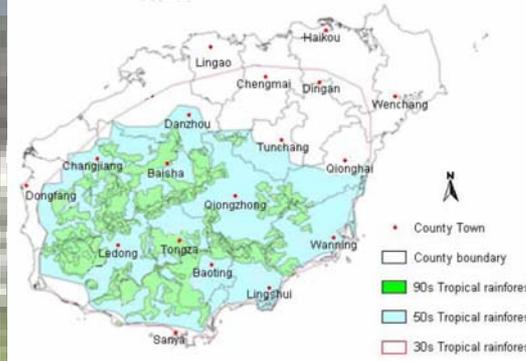


Fig. 1. Map showing change in forested areas in Hainan since the 1930s.¹ Much of the remaining natural forest, especially in the south, is secondary.

Fig. 3. Map showing the change in Hainan gibbon distribution over the last century.¹ Hainan gibbons are now restricted to 15 km² of continuous habitat within Bawangling National Nature Reserve (red); searches elsewhere have been unsuccessful.

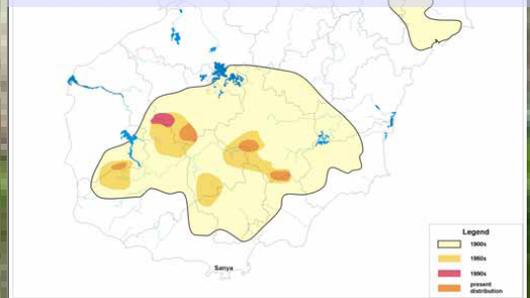


Photo 2. Ecologists from Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden help Bawangling reserve staff identify and collect native seeds for the tree nursery. © John Fellowes/KFBG



Photo 3. The Bawangling tree nursery. Some 80,000 native trees have been planted to enlarge and connect forest fragments, with thinning of pines, and in-situ seedling survival is over 80% after two years. Much more restoration work is needed. © John Fellowes/KFBG

Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden (KFBG), a self-funded charity based in Hong Kong with an active conservation programme in Mainland China, was invited to convene the Workshop and Action Plan for Hainan Gibbon Conservation by the Hainan conservation authorities in 2003. Since then it has worked closely with Hainan and Bawangling conservation staff to implement the Action Plan.

KFBG has helped establish nurseries for over 30 native tree species, emphasising fast-growing gibbon food species, and funded (with the government and the Gibbon Conservation Alliance) the replacement of several patches of pine plantation with natural forest, totaling 130 hectares. KFBG has offered to oversee further planting on PSGB's behalf, with no "overheads".

To convert and plant more adjoining areas, some £350 per hectare is needed. A donation of just £10 would recreate a tennis-court sized area of habitat for the gibbons and thousands of other forest species. It would also send a powerful message to the people of Hainan: that their gibbons and forests have value, even to people across the world.



Photo 4. Male Hainan gibbon. While a number of young have been born in recent years, and up to five individuals live outside groups, no new breeding groups have been formed. Habitat suitability is one of various possible impediments. © Lee Kwok Shing/KFBG

References

- Chan BPL, Fellowes JR, Geissmann T and Zhang JF (eds), 2005. *Hainan Gibbon Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan – Version 1 (last updated November 2005)*. Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden Technical Report No. 3. KFBG, Hong Kong SAR, iii + 33 pp. www.gibbons.de/main/bo oks/2005hainan-gibbon-status.pdf
- Fellowes JR, Chan BPL, Zhou J, Chen SH, Yang SB and Ng SC, in press. Current status of the Hainan Gibbon (*Nomascus hainanus*): progress of population monitoring and other priority actions. *Asian Primates*.