

Conservation news and events

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“Tracking gibbons in Asia: Will they survive?”

A Siam Society Lecture

by

Warren Y. Brockelman, on 12 July 2012, 7:30 PM–9:30 PM,
at the Siam Society, Bangkok



The name of Dr. Warren Brockelman, distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mahidol University, and Research Associate of BIOTEC, National Science and Technology Development Agency, is inextricably linked with evolutionary, ecological and behavioural studies of gibbons and their native forest habitat. Throughout his long association with the Siam Society, Warren has remained one of the best-known figures in the Natural History Section. As the editor of the *Natural History Bulletin* for almost thirty years he presided over its development and greatly enhanced its profile as a scientific journal. He has also led and co-led many forest hikes and expeditions on behalf of the Siam Society, and organized at least one major symposium for the society. In his entertaining and informative lecture, “Tracking gibbons in Asia: Will they survive?”, Warren commenced by telling us how his path, as a researcher, first became intertwined with that of his research subjects. His initial acquaintance with gibbons was at the SEATO Lab-established captive colony, on Ket Kiao island, off Chonburi, to which, roughly 40 years ago, he was attached while serving in the US Army. It was from there that his lifelong work on these engaging arboreal apes, all of which are globally threatened and listed in the IUCN Red Data Book, began. His early hikes in the forests of South-East Thailand, including Khao Soi Dao Wildlife Sanctuary and Khao Chamao National Park, in the range of the Pileated Gibbon *Hylobates pileatus*, implemented the first studies and population estimates of that species. Since then, Warren and his many students have studied the ecological and behavioural interactions of Pileated and White-handed Gibbons (*H. lar*) in and near their narrow zone of hybridization, around the headwaters of one of the tributaries of the Mun River, in Khao Yai National Park. Studies are continuing on the social behavior, demography, diet, and foraging behavior of gibbons in Khao Yai, in what is now the longest-running continuous field study of gibbons anywhere in the world. As an adjunct Warren and his collaborators have established a 30 ha long-term

forest dynamics plot at Mo-Singto where studies have expanded to cover interactions among a much greater range of plants and animals.

After introducing us to the 17 species of gibbons currently recognised, Warren took us on a ramble throughout the collective range of the family Hylobatidae, extending from the NE Indian subcontinent to Indochina, S China, and south to the Greater Sundas (Sumatra, Java and Borneo, and encompassing the Mentawai islands, which hold Kloss's Gibbon, *Hylobates klossii*, possibly one of the least known species). One of Warren's most important contributions has been the development of reliable census methods, involving the establishment of listening posts and triangulation, to determine the locations of family groups. He showed us how true population size in many gibbon species has hitherto usually been under-estimated. Nonetheless, while numbers of some gibbon species are greater than realized, so the threats to their forest habitat, and in some cases hunting for bushmeat, remain unabated or have increased. Numbers of some taxa, especially the two species of Black-crested Gibbons *Nomascus nasutus* and *N. hainanus* in S China, are down to perilously few individuals - possibly too few to survive. Due to continuing transformation of the landscape (development and deforestation) even larger, relatively "safe" populations, such as Pileated Gibbons in SW Cambodia, are also at risk of massive decline.

Warren's work in Thailand has been an inspiration to other field researchers in neighbouring countries, especially Myanmar and China, where he has traveled widely and tirelessly to advise and assist gibbon conservation and survey projects.

Warren's lecture elicited many questions from the audience to which he responded with both erudition and humour, reminding this writer that it was always the greatest fun to be out in the field with Ajarn Warren, whether hiking in the forest, or sharing a glass of whisky in a village headman's house at the end of the day. Warren's innate modesty (as well as the time constraint) perhaps prevented him from recounting further entertaining and amusing fieldwork-related anecdotes. There is no doubt that Warren has experienced enough "thrills and spills" along the forest trail for great many future Siam Society lectures, and we hope we may persuade him to return in future, so as to relate them.

Philip Round