



A female gibbon atop the forest canopy in Veun Sai-Siem Pang Conservation Area in Ratanakkiri province. INSET: A male gibbon perched beneath a treetop in the conservation area. PHOTOS: KRISTIN HARRISON AND JEREMY GINSBERG

# Soulful tunes from the canopy

A new eco-tourism project in Ratanakkiri province aims to preserve the world's largest known population of gibbons

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IT is 5am and the first signs of light can be seen through the jungle canopy. The gibbons are awake. Uncurling long limbs from sleeping positions they start singing to the dawn before swinging soulfully through the trees. With intelligent eyes and thoughtful mannerisms they move in harmony with the forest. Until now there has not been an avenue to view these willowy primates. What has changed? Cambodia's first gibbon eco-tourism venture has been established.

A ranger and research outpost in Veun Sai-Siem Pang Conservation Area, which adjoins Virachey National Park in Ratanakkiri province, will be base camp for adventurous travellers hoping to spot the humble creatures. The outpost was established in 2009 as part of a broader aim to document biodiversity values and engage local communities through development initiatives. By establishing eco-tourism projects, local residents are given jobs and incentives to protect their environment. As Tourism Minister Thong Khon has described eco-tourism, it combines "economy and ecology".

Gibbon Spotting Cambodia is a joint venture between tour companies DutchCo Trekking Cambodia, See Cambodia Differently and village residents represented by community-based eco-tourism management committees. These committees were set up by Conservation International. CI also provides funding to and works in partnership with the Cambodian Forestry Administration to protect this area. As well as an eco-tourism site and CI research hub, the outpost is a launching point for patrols to prevent crimes in the conservation area, like wildlife poaching or logging.

Some local ethnic communities are said to ascribe a sense of spiritual significance to

gibbons. Masters of Science student Julia Hill studied cultural perceptions of primates in the conservation area and came across some interesting stories told by Kavet and Lao minorities. Her research detailed the Kavet people's tale of a worldwide flood in which everyone was washed away and killed, before returning as gibbons. They see gibbons as ancestrally significant and believe these creatures cry rather than sing in the morning because they are sad about their past.

Lao people, however, believe these primates are capable of stopping the rain. Most interviewed by Hill said they would be sad to see gibbons disappear from their forest. It is possible that the spiritual beliefs of villagers surrounding the conservation area are linked to why hunting is considered a low threat to populations there.

Unlike many other areas of Southeast Asia, gibbons are not exploited here. "They are truly spirits of the forest; their mournful morning songs, the way they swing through the canopy almost noiselessly, disappearing as quickly as they appear," is how Dr Ben Rawson, CI's Veun Sai forests scape manager, describes gibbons on his poetic blog.

Rawson commented on a finding of Hill's research that showed that if benefits from eco-tourism were realised ethnic communities would be less prone to hunt. "I think we are starting with a good basis for long-term conservation of the gibbons and other primate species at the site," he said.

"We are hoping that the eco-tourism activities make a clear connection between conservation of natural resources and sustainable livelihoods. We want the livelihoods of local communities to improve while providing motivation for protection of the resource base that is so important for local communities."

This eco-tourism initiative is designed to directly benefit five communities of ethnic Lao and Kavet people who live on the reserve's southern borders. Rawson explained that spending from a communal bank account is negotiated between village leaders and the community-based eco-tourism management teams. Activities which these funds are spent on must demonstrate a collective benefit and align with conservation goals like community patrols or no-interest loans for families in need.

Not only will this eco-tourism project raise money to improve the livelihoods of local villagers, it will also raise the profile of endangered primates.

In 2010 a new species of gibbon was discovered in Veun Sai-Seem Pang Conservation Area and was described as the northern yellow-cheeked crested gibbon. The 550km<sup>2</sup> conservation site has the largest known population in the world with around 500 groups. Gibbon Spotting Cambodia's first three-day trek offered a rare opportunity to meet these creatures. The discovery of this population highlights the ecological importance of the area, which hosts a number of other threatened primate species like the pygmy lorises and douc langur in addition to clouded leopards and Sun bears.

Rawson hopes that by looking at the reserve's relatively undisturbed population of gibbons, they could gain insight into other gibbon species living under higher threat in countries like China and Vietnam. He co-wrote the report *The Conservation Status of Gibbons in Vietnam* that was released this week and describes the situation to Cambodia's east. "At best, remaining gibbon populations persist at significantly lower than natural densities, at worst, they have suffered local extinctions."

This is attributed to habitat destruction,

hunting for bush meat, poaching for the pet trade and use in traditional medicines. Two years ago the CI primatologist was doing survey work in Vietnam, where his blog warned that the forests were becoming quiet. "For me, it is an immensely sad moment when I sit, perched on a hill in the forest at 5am, waiting for the sun to come up and for the gibbon morning chorus to begin – and all I hear is silence."

The future for Cambodia's gibbon population is looking, at least for now, significantly brighter.

Back in Ratanakkiri, Rawson described the situation. "The major threats are potentially the existence of an exploratory mining concession which covers a large proportion of the site, although realised threats will depend on the location and extent of activities and conversion of the area for an Economic Land Concession." He noted the recent decision by the Prime Minister Hun Sen to put a moratorium on ELCs.

Rik Hendriks, general manager of DutchCo Trekking Cambodia, based in Ban Lung Ratanakkiri, stressed the fragility of nature when combined with irresponsible practices. He described eco-tourism as a sustainable way of working with the environment for long-term gain, rather than the short-sightedness of resource exploitation. <sup>20</sup>

A special discount for gibbon spotting is offered until the end of September. For more info visit: [www.gibbonspottingcambodia.com](http://www.gibbonspottingcambodia.com)  
Rawson's blog can be found at <http://blog.conservation.org/2010/10/wake-up-call-for-gibbons/>. His report on the status of gibbons in Vietnam can be found at [www.conservation.org/Documents/CI\\_The-Conservation-Status-of-Gibbons-in-Vietnam\\_2012.pdf](http://www.conservation.org/Documents/CI_The-Conservation-Status-of-Gibbons-in-Vietnam_2012.pdf).