How CBSG, South Asia works holistically for Hoolock Gibbon,

Sally Walker

Reprinted from CBSG / RSG Joint Newsletter 2009

In 2002 ZOO, WILD and CBSG, South Asia conducted a Conservation Assessment and Management Plan Workshop (CAMP) for South Asian Primates. A "CAMP" is a workshop process developed by Dr. U. S. Seal and Dr. Thomas J. Foose over two decades ago to assess the threat status of a species and assign an appropriate IUCN category. By 2002, ZOO had conducted more than ten CAMPs and even had added our own conventions to the process.

South Asian Primatologists from nearly all the countries of the region attended and provided information which, until that time had not been known, to all. For example, the Western Hoolock Gibbon, which was known for a long time to be in trouble was revealed to be in deep trouble indeed. The NE Indian primatologists brought information on all localities in its range which clearly illustrated that the Hoolocks had been declining exponentially for the past 3-4 decades in India and in Bangladesh.

The CAMP workshop recommended a Population and Habitat Viability Assessment Workshop PHVA, another CBSG process, which uses VORTEX computer simulation models with information contributed by specialists. The CAMP was funded by several sponsors including Conservation International, Margot Marsh Biodiversity Foundation, Apenheul Primate Park, Primate Conservation Inc., Fauna and Flora International, North of England Zoological Society, North Carolina Zoological Park, Lincoln Park Zoo, Thrigby Hall Wildlife Gardens, Primate Society of Great Britain, European Association of Zoos and Aquaria, and Oklahoma City Zoo.

In 2004 CBSG South Asia, ZOO, WILD and other partners including the Primate Specialist Group organised a PHVA for Western Hoolock Gibbon. According to VORTEX, the probability of extinction of the entire Indian population of WHG was 75% and for the Bangladesh population it was 95% in the medium term future.

Drastic measures were called for to save this species. At the PHVA it was recommended by participants that small populations of individuals and families of Hoolock Gibbons living in isolation and surrounded by human activity be translocated to a better locality near larger populations, so that eventually they could join larger populations. Due to behavioural characteristics of gibbons and other factors however, this is not a straightforward exercise. It requires detailed preparation and training, education for stakeholder groups including local communities, etc. The PHVA recommended an aggressive education programme. The PHVA Report and a Summary for laypersons was widely distributed by CBSG South Asia. The PHVA had been funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, Great Ape Conservation Fund, Chester Zoo and others.

Soon after this, ZOO became a representative of the Primate Specialist Group in South Asia.

In 2006 ZOO and SAN-IZE, the regional educator network, designed an extensive Hoolock Gibbon education programme, with a Manual for educators of all types, educational packets to complement the education activities and programmes and other items. Also ZOO and SAN-IZE organised and conducted six intensive three-day educator training workshops in North East India, which were intended to train educators, including even field biologists of Hoolock Gibbon, in a variety of active learning techniques which they, in turn, were to pass on to other educators. This programme was also sponsored by USFWS Great Ape Conservation Fund.

In the meantime, realising that training in trans-location was required urgently before anyone attempted it at the current level of understanding, we prepared a proposal for a translocation training workshop for Hoolock Gibbon to be held in Assam for field biologists, forest and wildlife staff and other relevant individuals facing a grim scenario. The problems for 120 Hoolock populations throughout 5 states of northeastern India are habitat loss and hunting, including 52 isolated populations (43%) of 1-10 individuals. Twelve healthy populations (10%) consisting of 51-160 individuals are distributed in two states while 56 populations (47%) vary widely from 11-50 individuals in 4 states.

Given the difficulty of curtailing habitat destruction and hunting, and of effective protection, the implementation of immediate, radical conservation methods may save existing healthy populations from further decline and extinction. Wild-to wild rapid translocations utilizing the small populations to strengthen the larger ones will thereby salvage many of those populations as well. Targeting localities nearby the larger and better protected Hoolock habitats as recipient sites would satisfy behavioural, genetic and demographic issues. A programme including rapid translocation, restoration, economic and social features by education and awareness, following IUCN Reintroduction Guidelines may save Hoolocks from extinction in India.

The proposal was accepted and we have conducted two workshops with different target groups, the latter being forest and wildlife policy makers. Therefore, the CBSG processes of CAMP, PHVA, conflict reso-lution, conservation planning brought us to a point where a rational reintroduction / translocation exer-cise can be contemplated in which the Reintroduction SG and its Guidelines will play a major role.

Read more about these exciting workshops and their potential for conservation of Hoolock Gibbon in the following pages of a Draft Report.