

NOTES

Salween River Gibbon Study Area: Thailand and Burma

R. PARSONS in 1940 discovered that rivers determine the distribution of gibbons. The concolor gibbon lives from the Mekong eastward, lar occupies the interval between the Mekong and Salween, and west of the Salween is the hoolock. Parsons determined that the hoolock, common along the east bank of the Brahmaputra, was absent from identical forest on the west. Mr. Vandee, Mrs. Marshall, and I went up to that little stretch of the Salween River that forms the Thai-Burma border at Mae Sarieng District to see if Parsons was right. He was, and the place is so beautiful and the people were so nice to us that we went back again.

At the comfortable hotel in Mae Sarieng, the district capital, you climb at dawn upon the top of a truckload of barter goods and start west for the several hours' drive over the mountains and down the other side to the fishing village of Mae Sam Laep on the mighty Salween River. You take a boat downstream four or five kilometers to the Royal Thai Hydrology Station, where the river level is monitored. Unlike everybody else in Thailand, the local people and officials of the station all know the hoolock and lar gibbons that confront each other across the torrent.

Actually the two species of gibbons pay no attention to each other. The lars have a chorus of song every morning; their song is slower and grander than that of the same species heard at Khao Yai. Our tape recordings in stereo preserve the marvelous echoes along the river gorge. The hoolocks to the west sing only about once a week. But when they start, you are the captive audience of a fantastic concert. One family may start with a long series of single, dove-like monotonies. Eventually the complicated polyphony begins and the notes are read off for each voice not from a score but from a genetic code. Other families join in one after another, each audible for up to four miles. Both species are endangered; let us ask how they can persist in this out-of-the-way place, and what are their chances to survive?

The reason the gibbons persist in this most ideal spot for studying them is that the forest on both sides of the river is intact. It is evergreen forest on the north slopes and in the canyons, deciduous dipterocarp (teak) forest on the south slopes.

The forest persists because it is a no-man's land between the Karen Army, behind the Thai border, and the Burmese army, patrolling no farther east than the crest of the westward mountains. That leaves the whole east slope of that range untouched and untravelled, as a home for the hoolock.

Now the Burmese and Thai armies have made a pact to clear-cut the entire forest. The Thai generals will get the valuable logs of which they have none left in their own country, and the Burmese Army will wipe out the buffer zone protecting the Karens. Human greed and warfare will drive to extinction the two species of gibbons, who have no voice in the dispute over their own home. Their voices will be preserved only on our stereo tapes.

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R E F E R E N C E

PARSONS, R.E. 1940. Rivers as barriers to the distribution of gibbons. *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.* 42: 434.

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