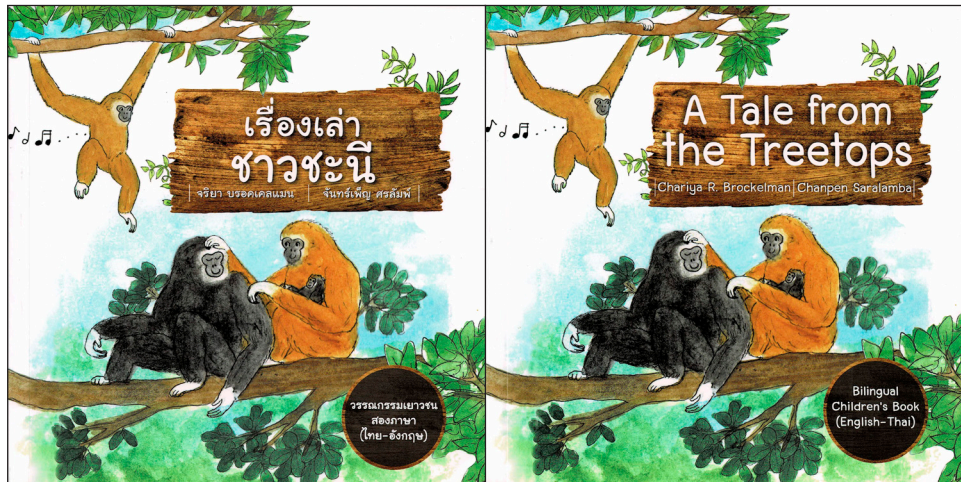


A Tale from the Treetops by Chariya R. Brockelman and Chanpen Saralamba. National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA), Pathum Thani, Thailand. 2023. 124 pp. Thai & English in one book (bilingual). ISBN 978-616-584-141-2 (paperback).



A Tale from the Treetops is a children’s book detailing the adventures of a family of white-handed gibbons (*Hylobates lar*) at Khao Yai National Park. A collaboration between writers, editors, and scientists, this book aims to engage kids in gibbon biology in scientifically accurate detail, in a way that is not too “teachy” or “preachy”. Current understandings about gibbons—from their social dynamics to their ecological role in the forest—have been gathered from decades of research at the Mo Singto area of Khao Yai, which has served as a study site for white-handed gibbons and long term biodiversity research and monitoring since 1979.

Khao Yai welcomes more than one million visitors annually. This popular destination attracts local and foreign tourists alike, many of whom come specifically for its diverse wildlife, including gibbons. Yet, those interested in learning more about gibbons are challenged to find literature that provides a deeper glimpse into their lives, especially for young people and through a format that is not only engaging but also scientifically accurate. The authors aim to fill that gap in the tradition of nature writing in Thailand.

The authors initiate readers into the world of gibbons by first describing the characteristic male-female duet at daybreak—as in real life, where gibbons are heard calling in the distance and rarely seen. Luckily for readers, they are treated to an up close and personal look at gibbon family life. After describing the beautiful setting of the gibbons’ home in the lush tropical evergreen forest of Khao Yai National Park, the story moves quickly to follow the experiences of a gibbon family at Mo Singto. The family consists of a male, female, juvenile male, and infant female—personified as Tutt and Am, the mother and father; brother Tan; and Tubtim, the star of the show.

Richly detailed, the story takes readers through different stages of family life over nine chapters: *Where are the Gibbons?*, *Tubtim Arrives*, *Our Gibbon Home*, *Childhood*, *The Forest Gets Drier*, *Tan's New Song*, *First Love*, *Shattered Dreams*, *A New Promise*. Through dialogue between the family members, the book chronicles the arrival of Tubtim and her early adventures as she navigates her forest home and learns the way of gibbons; her brother leaving the family group to defend a new territory at maturity; and Tubtim reaching maturity herself and establishing a new family.

Infused throughout the story are insights into gibbon behavior and forest ecology based on decades-long studies at Mo Singto. The friendly storytelling format, told from the gibbons' perspective, shares with readers the science behind the gibbons' behaviors as they go about their day. For example, as Mother imparts her wisdom to young Tubtim, readers find themselves learning about such topics as: grooming behavior, why gibbons seek out different sleeping trees each night, gibbon predators, interactions with neighboring gibbons and other inhabitants of the forest, and more. Ecological concepts are also craftily woven into the story: the seasonality of the forest as food becomes scarce during the dry season, the plants and insects that make up a gibbon's diet, the role gibbons play as "forest planters" in maintaining forest health, and the significance of gibbon poop!

The story does not shy away from somber realities, such as habitat destruction, poaching, and the illegal animal trade. A hornbill character describes how hunters steal baby gibbons by killing their mothers and how hornbills are killed for their beaks to make jewelry. The conflict at the heart of the story is the construction of a new road through the gibbons' territory, fragmenting their habitat and posing a dangerous situation for Tubtim and her partner as they cross the road amid speeding cars.

Thankfully, there are also many moments of humor throughout the book, such as the gibbons' perspective of "researcher-humans"—the "ones that just sit around and stare up at us all day and then go away" and strangely "get all excited about our poop". It is some of these researcher-humans who finally resolve the dire road crossing problem, by creating a rope bridge high above the road to provide safe passage for gibbons.

With charming illustrations, this book pulls readers right in. The dual language format—English flipped one way, and Thai when flipped the other—works well and increases the accessibility of gibbon research to a wider audience. The bilingual glossary is also a nice feature, explaining technical terms and providing further insights into gibbon life and conservation. While the personification of the gibbons may be distracting for some, the book successfully achieves its intended goals. With relatable characters and many moments of real jeopardy (hungry pythons, hunters, road crossings), the story keeps young audiences interested and eager to learn what happens next. The emotional pull is strong, and the human agency in the resolution of the road conflict is an empowering example for children. There is also much to offer older audiences. With a storyline based on research at Mo Singto, the book excels at sharing scientific research with a nonscientific audience, effectively conveying gibbon behaviors, the forest context, and current threats to gibbons and their forest home.

A Tale from the Treetops is a great book for families to dive into and explore together. This story is so full of life and rich detail, and with the wealth of gibbon data available from Mo Singto, it could conceivably be turned into a picture book series—or even an animated educational children's program! Adding photos of an actual gibbon family to the glossary in future versions may provide a nice complement to the illustrations while increasing visual interest, empathy, and connection for the reader.

As a former “researcher-human” student studying gibbon seed dispersal (i.e., poop) at Mo Singto, under the guidance of Warren Brockelman many years ago, this book spoke to me at a very personal level. I am excited that its publication means a greater understanding of gibbons, forest ecology, and wildlife conservation by the general public, particularly children. I gladly recommend this book to anyone interested in learning more about these captivating “singing apes”. This book fills an important niche and paves the way for more research-based, localized wildlife/conservation stories targeted towards the younger generation—where the hope lies in future conservation & stewardship.

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