

Chasing the gibbons' call



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Cambodia's first Khmer primate expert on why he's chosen a life researching the Kingdom's endangered yellow-cheeked, crested gibbons

IN the depths of Cambodia's tropical forest, Channa Phan wakes up at 4am. The air is cool and wet, and he puts on clothes that have not been washed for days in order to neutralise his smell. He loads his bag with rice and beef or pork - never fish, because the smell would betray his presence.

Sometimes he brings some alcohol because if the night is cold, he likes to drink it for warmth. He takes his flashlight and waits for a call - the call of the gibbons.

Unlike poachers, Channa Phan will not follow just any gibbon song. It took one month for this young Cambodian researcher to recognise the song of "his" gibbons, a family of four he has been following.

"Each of them has a specific song, just as each human being has his own voice," he said.

When he hears the male, he follows the voice and walks quickly for a few kilometres along old elephant roads in this remote section of Ratanakkiri.



Photo by: **PHOTO SUPPLIED**

Channa Phan hard at work in the Bokor Mountain area.

CAMBODIAN GIBBONS

In August 2008, the Wildlife Conservation Society counted 2,500 yellow-cheeked crested gibbons in Cambodia's Seima Biodiversity Conservation Area, an estimate that represents the largest known population of this endangered species in the world.

Equipped with modern GPS equipment, he is not afraid of getting lost, but he does regularly come across wild animals.

"I met a bear one day. I was so surprised that I ran away and the bear did the same on the opposite side. Local people say there are king cobras and leopards, too, but I have never seen one."

As a scientist writing his master's degree thesis at the Royal University of Phnom Penh with funding from the government and Fauna and Flora International, Channa Phan thinks only about his goal of observing the gibbons in their daily lives and creating a database of their actions. The yellow-cheeked crested gibbons are an endangered species native to Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos. Scientists know very little about the lives of these blonde or black monkeys in the wild.

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"I want to know their activities because in the future, if some gibbons are in captivity and we want to release them, we have to know what their life in the wild is like."

Channa Phan records their activities: When they call, what their call sounds like, how they take care of their young, how they eat, how they mark their territory, when they sleep, how they travel, etc.

After so much time following the gibbons, he is confident that he can figure out their actions.

"Sometimes you can just guess why they are doing things. I like to work with them. They are so funny."

These short moments of understanding are the result of long, hard work. Channa Phan will sometimes spend an entire month in the forest without seeing his gibbon family. Last July, he saw them for only a few days and even then sometimes it was just for half an hour. In August, he did not see them at all.

Nowadays, Channa Phan thinks the gibbons are comfortable around him.

"I think the gibbons recognised me after a few months. If I was with someone

they did not know, they escaped."

The love he has for the forest has helped him remain patient and hopeful. In the early morning, he is filled with wonder at the flying hornbill, the peculiar gait of wild pigs or the playful games of munjacks.

He shares these observations with his friends in Phnom Penh, and as a result, his friends have nicknamed him Gibbon. Many of them are interested in business and think he has gone bananas, but he always offers the same response: "Different people, different favourites".

He knows his friends and family worry about his safety. He tries to reassure them, which means he avoids telling them too much about the day he called the police to stop illegal clear-cutting. Nothing happened to the loggers, except they became angry and stole Channa Phan's food. He was forced to return to Phnom Penh for money.

The villagers respect him and sometimes call him for help. He is honest with them, wears the same clothes as them and joins their ceremonies at the pagoda.

"I tell them, 'This forest is yours. If it is cut, you will lose the forest. You will lose the wildlife for the next generation. You will not be able to collect food anymore. I think they listen to me. Cambodia has very good species that the world does not have. This is our [environmental] capital. We need to use it carefully."

At the age of 28, Channa Phan plans to do his PhD on primates. Next month, he will start a new job as researcher and monitor for the global conservation group WWF. He is still quietly resisting the social pressure from people who would like him to live in town. His passion for the wildlife occupies his life and makes young Cambodians realise that they, too, could have a role in this kind of research.

Close Window