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PRIMATES
**SECTION ON
SMALL APES**

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SSA Policy – Gibbons Should NOT be Kept as Pets

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Whether primates are born in captivity or the wild, they belong with their own families, not with humans as pets (Waters, Oram, Spaan, Aldrich, & Dempsey, 2022).

Gibbons in the illegal trade

The online wildlife trade is significant and is exacerbated by the internet's ability to reach a wide audience in a very short amount of time (Daniels *et al.*, 2021; Quarles *et al.*, 2023; Reuter and Schaefer, 2017; Smith and Cheyne, 2017; Spooner and Stride, n.d). It is evident that a variety of online social platforms are being used to conduct trade in wildlife, both legal and illegal. Although reports on the misuse of the internet for the trade in illegal wildlife are available, there has been very little research that examines the prevalence of the trade on access-limited social media sites (Bezanson *et al.*, n.d.; Freund *et al.*, 2021; Mohd Rameli *et al.*, 2020). Unfortunately, where research does exist, results show it is difficult to quantify the scale of the wildlife trade effectively, as the multiple layers in which it operates are often untraceable.

The trend of trading gibbons on social media is a relatively recent, but increasingly prominent threat to their survival. A preliminary survey on Facebook conducted by Smith and Cheyne (2017) and IAR Indonesia between 2015 and 2019, revealed that as many as 316 gibbons were sold (an average of 63 individuals per year). During this period, there were 165 posts from Facebook users who stated that they wanted to buy gibbons as a pet – indicating that market demand is still high. The continued poaching of gibbons, especially from small, isolated populations in disturbed and fragmented forests to feed the demand for the exotic pet trade, can lead to local extinctions and be a critical factor their survival. It is considered inappropriate today to deprive gibbons of their natural habitat to create a short-lived domestic pet. As you know, in Southeast Asia, the wildlife trade still sells young gibbons and in some areas, without money changing hands, baby gibbons still end up being hand-raised as expendable 'pets' (www.gibbonesia.id).

The results of a survey on Facebook in Indonesia between 2015 and 2021 revealed that more than 800 infant gibbons (comprising five different species) had been offered online. Current law enforcement efforts to tackle the gibbon trade appears to be either insufficient

or ineffective and does not create a suitable deterrent against hunters, traders and buyers. There are numerous rescue centres that receive gibbons in Indonesia¹ that focus on rehabilitation and release of displaced gibbons, but until the root of the problem is addressed, i.e., the trade, the flow of gibbons into rescue centres will continue.

The illegal trade in gibbons is also a problem in Malaysia (Abdi *et al.*, n.d.). Like Indonesia, gibbons in Malaysia are sold rampantly online, and celebrities further influence the trade by posting photos of their 'exotic' pets, encouraging many others to buy them. Enforcement is lacking and the laws in place have many loopholes that traders gladly take advantage of. Since there's only one gibbon rehabilitation centre in many gibbon range countries, there is still a lack of knowledge for the importance of rehabilitation, and gibbon owners tend to hard release their gibbons against the *IUCN Best Practice Guidelines for the Rehabilitation and Translocation of Gibbons* (C. O. Campbell, Cheyne, & Rawson, 2015).

Gibbons and the illegal wildlife trade

All 20 species are seriously threatened by habitat loss and the illegal trade of gibbon infants and are listed on the IUCN Red List as Vulnerable (1 species), Endangered (14 species) or Critically Endangered (5 species) (Fan and Bartlett, 2017; Lwin *et al.*, 2021). The issues surrounding the gibbon trade are multi-dimensional and need to be addressed as such. They are re-enforcing each other and cannot be tackled in isolation. These issues are:

- (1) lack of law enforcement on gibbon traffickers and thus trading is seen as a low-risk crime with high return;
- (2) lack of public awareness about the illegality and impacts;
- (3) no consequences for keeping gibbons as pets;
- (4) social media platforms such as Facebook enabling the online trade;
- (5) inadequate government centres for confiscated gibbons and NGO-run centres operating almost at full capacity;
- (6) difficulty of releasing gibbons back to the wild due to territorial behaviour, habituation to humans, psychological and physical trauma, and risk of disease transfer to the wild population.

The impact

The majority of gibbons observed in the online trade are infants or juveniles under 4 years old. For hunters to obtain the infant, the mother would also need to be killed. Consequently, the actual number of gibbons removed from their habitat is likely to be much higher than the aforementioned 800 gibbons observed in trade.

This illegal gibbon trade for pets has become more and more rampant amidst the Corona pandemic because of their 'cute' appearance, and gibbons are also advertised as suitable companions when in self-isolation. In addition, social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Instagram* exacerbate the situation since it indirectly gives a message as if it is "safe" to keep gibbons as pets in the house.

¹ Kalaweit, Aspinall Indonesia, Sumatran Rescue Centre, Javan Gibbon Centre, JAAN, Conservation Action Network, International Animal Rescue Indonesia, ASTI and Cikananga.



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Gibbons are highly intelligent and require ongoing mental and social stimulation much like human children (Cheyne, 2009b). The level of constant attention a primate pet requires is often exhausting to caretakers. Gibbons are psychologically damaged when removed from their mothers as infants (Cheyne, 2007). Without adequate mental and social stimulation provided by others of their kind, gibbons often engage in abnormal behaviours such as self-harm, which is distressing for the gibbon (C. O. Campbell et al., 2015; Cheyne, 2007; Cheyne, Campbell, & Payne, 2012; Cheyne, Chivers, & Sugardjito, 2008).

Overexploitation is one of the largest drivers of biodiversity loss, with human activities such as hunting, logging, and the pet trade impacting thousands of threatened and near-threatened species worldwide (A Estrada et al., 2017; Alejandro Estrada et al., 2018; Junker et al., 2020).

The primate trade occurs domestically and internationally (Cheyne, 2009a; V Nijman, 2005; V Nijman, Yang Martinez, & Shepherd, 2009; Vincent Nijman, Spaan, Rode-Margono, Wirdateti, & Nekaris, 2017) and every year millions of primates are killed in addition to the tens of thousands, if not more, that enter the live trade for use as pets and for entertainment and biomedical research (Nekaris, McCabe, Spaan, Ali, & Nijman, 2018; Ni et al., 2018).

Gibbons as pets and props in the social media marketplace

The trade in gibbons, particularly in the genera *Hylobates* and *Symphalangus*, appears to be thriving at the national and international levels (Brockelman and Osterberg, 2015). The rapid growth and widespread use of social media facilitates the trade, which often occurs undetected. Evidence points to Indonesia and Malaysia as the two habitat countries with the most prolific illegal pet trade, predominantly in very young animals (see Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1 Post on Instagram selling a young Javan gibbon (*Hylobates moloch*).

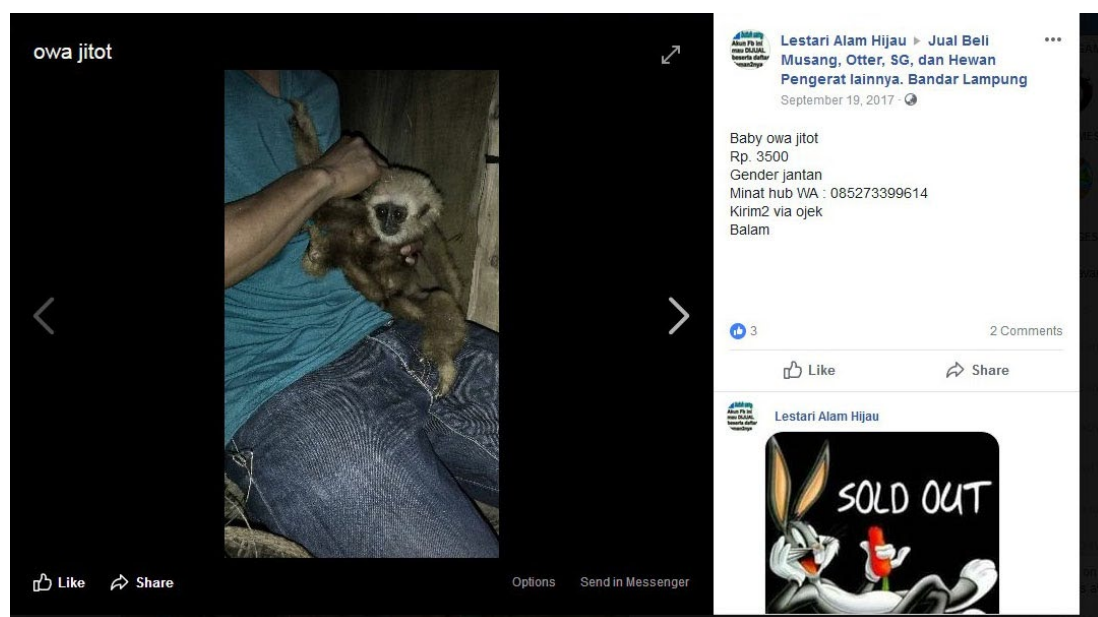


Figure 2 Post on Facebook selling a young white-handed gibbon (*Hylobates lar*).

Impact on wild gibbon populations

The continuing pet trade decimates the natural population. Should gibbons be “lucky” enough to survive after capture and sale, they are often kept in unsuitable and unnatural conditions. In captivity gibbons are not given the types of food that they are adapted to



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finding in their natural habitat. They have no opportunity to find a mate, thereby contributing nothing to their species' propagation. For species that reproduce slowly, once every 2–3 years (Brockelman, Reichard, Treesucon, & Raemaekers, 1998; Reichard, 2003), conditions and losses described above are a devastating blow to wild populations (Chan, Mak, Yang, & Huang, 2017; Fan, 2017; Ma, Brockelman, Light, Bartlett, & Fan, 2019; Yin et al., 2016).

Why gibbons are inappropriate as pets

Aside from the International and National laws protecting gibbons (all range countries have legal prohibitions against the trade and ownership of gibbons) there are social and behavioural reasons to not own gibbons as pets. Primate pets often behave in ways we interpret as cute or endearing, but these displays often signal they are in extreme distress. There are many reasons beyond the legal ones why gibbons are inappropriate as pets:

- Gibbons live in tight knit socially bonded family groups (N. Hu et al., 2018). The removal of the adult female to obtain the infant she is carrying for the pet trade will likely kill the adult female and cause a break-down of the family unit. Other individuals within the group may also be killed and the impact on younger gibbons e.g. those under four years old is unclear. The offtake of adult females to obtain an infant will likely result in the loss of two adult females and one infant dead for every one infant which survives into the trade. Causes include lack of proper care for any captured infant in captivity, injuries to the infant incurred during capture (e.g. bullet or pellet wounds, SMC pers. obs.). Thus for every young gibbon in the pet trade, 3 gibbons are lost from the wild population, impacting social behaviour and long-term breeding potential losses. They are usually taken opportunistically during the deforestation process when they are trapped in a small forest fragment or an isolated tree or during human gibbon conflict. However, poachers also specifically target gibbons to snatch the infant when they know there is a buyer. For every gibbon infant that is traded, there are usually 2-4 family members killed in order to get the baby.
- Gibbons have complex social needs and suffer psychologically when kept alone. Gibbons are wild animals. Being raised in captivity does not change this. As they mature, they naturally become increasingly independent and assertive, unlike domesticated pets. Gibbons are highly intelligent and need ongoing mental and social stimulation which humans cannot provide (Cunningham and Anderson, 2004; Cunningham *et al.*, 2006; Cheyne, 2009a; Inoue *et al.*, 2016).

- Gibbons have complex dietary needs which cannot be met when they are kept as pets leading to medical problems (Bartlett, 1997; Cheyne, 2008; Y. Hu, Xu, & Yang, 1990; Kappeler, 1984).
- Gibbons become sexually mature at around 8 years old. They will develop large canines (used for feeding and fighting in the wild to defend their territory) which can cause severe injury to humans (Dirks, 1998). The vast majority of gibbons which are hand-reared as (illegal) pets regard the human owners as something like a parent – as long as the gibbons are still young. When the gibbons become sexually mature, however, they tend to regard owners of the opposite sex as potential mates, and humans of the same sex as potential rivals, which can lead to attacks.
- Primates are susceptible to many of the same infectious diseases as humans such as the flu and more serious diseases such as tuberculosis. Likewise, you, your family and friends can be exposed to diseases that may be difficult to diagnose and treat (Lanford, Chavez, Rico-Hesse, & Mootnick, 2000; Sabatino et al., 1997; P. C. Smith, Yuill, Buchanan, & Chaicumpa, 1969).
- Primates in captivity require intensive professional care in specialised facilities. Accredited zoos and professional rescue centres are fully staffed with trained experts to manage the needs of the primates in their care. Most rescue centres and sanctuaries are, however, overwhelmed with ex-pet primates, so if you decide to surrender your pet you will have few options to provide them with appropriate lifetime care elsewhere, and they may have to be euthanised humanely (C. Campbell et al., 2008; C. O. Campbell et al., 2015; Cheyne, 2009a).
- You are not supporting conservation or welfare by acquiring a primate as a pet. Depending on where you live, your pet primate is highly likely taken from the wild. This means that their mother was probably killed, and her baby stolen. Alternatively, your pet primate may have been bred in a captive facility, and taken from their mother just after birth, thereby inhumanely depriving both for commercial gain. All primates have a fundamental need to remain with their mothers for an extended period and with their social group for the rest of their life.

Actions needed

It is of utmost importance to curb the trade that is detrimental for the long-term survival of gibbons across Indonesia and Malaysia as it puts an additional pressure on ongoing habitat loss and degradation, threatening to destabilize currently viable and intact gibbon populations. Besides undermining the conservation of wild gibbons and causing unimaginable suffering to individual gibbons who fall victim to the trade, significantly reducing their lifespan which can be over 45 years in the wild. The illegal trade also poses a significant risk to human and gibbon health through the transmission of infectious diseases. The laws exist – all nations with wild gibbons must be encouraged to increase the level of enforcement, both across social media platforms and in the field.

Finally, the rescue and rehabilitation centres must have more help to deal with the many many gibbons being kept as pets and which are confiscated or donated when the owners can no longer cope with the gibbon. These centres are stretched to capacity with the number of



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gibbons in need of rescue. Even zoos are unable to cope with the influx of donated unwanted gibbons and many end up alone in an enclosure.

- Do not buy a gibbon – even if you are buying this to take the gibbon to a rescue centre, you will only perpetuate the trade.
- Do not have your photo taken with a gibbon on a beach, in a bar, these gibbons have been poached from the wild
- Do go and see wild gibbons, they are amazing.
- Do share when you see a gibbon being kept as a pet with a local animal welfare organisation.

Gibbons belong in the wild, not as pets.

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