



IUCN
PRIMATES
SECTION ON
SMALL APES

International Gibbon Day - 24th October Annually

IUCN SSC Section on Small Apes: Statement on the 2026 Indonesian Fires and Haze

23 September 2026

Fires are once again burning across the forests and peatlands of Sumatra and Kalimantan. The smoke they produce is affecting millions of people and some of the most threatened primates on Earth, including the gibbons this Section exists to protect. This statement sets out what is known about the current fire season, what it means for gibbons and for people, and what the IUCN SSC Section on Small Apes (SSA) is asking of the international community. It is a factual statement, not a political one: fires of this scale, and the harm they cause, call for a coordinated international response.

The scale of the 2026 fire season

Satellite hotspot data show fires burning across Sumatra and Kalimantan since the dry season began in August 2026. On 15 September 2026, 1,037 high confidence hotspots were recorded nationally, with Central Kalimantan (266) and South Sumatra (245) worst affected, followed by South Kalimantan, Jambi, West Kalimantan and Riau. More than 200,000 hectares of forest and peatland burned between January and July 2026, and an estimated further 600,000 hectares burned in August alone. By 21 September at least 895,657 hectares had burned across Indonesia since the start of the year, roughly a third more than in 2019, making this the worst fire season in more than a decade. In the first week of September, Indonesia's fires released an estimated 19.7 million tonnes of emissions, over a third of the global total from fires that week. More than 50 aircraft have been deployed for water bombing and cloud seeding, supported by firefighting helicopters from Japan, but fires are expected to continue until the rains return in late October or November.

Haze from these fires has since spread across Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam. Air quality has reached hazardous levels in several of the worst affected towns, including Palangka Raya in Central Kalimantan and Pontianak in West Kalimantan, with fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) reported at more than 20 times World Health Organization guideline levels in places. On 2 September the air quality index in Central Kalimantan reached 1,919, more than six times the threshold for hazardous air, and readings above 1,100 were recorded in Sampit. On 15 September all five regions of Singapore recorded unhealthy air at the same time for the first time since 2019. Most of these fires are burning on degraded, drained peatland, which is highly flammable once dried out and can smoulder underground for weeks, made worse this year by a very strong El Niño and a positive Indian Ocean Dipole, which together have prolonged and deepened the drought.

Impacts on gibbons and their habitat

Central Kalimantan, the province worst affected by this year's fires, contains Sebangau National Park, home to the largest known population of the Bornean white-bearded gibbon (*Hylobates albibarbis*) and to thousands of Bornean orangutans (*Pongo pygmaeus*). In early September fire crossed the park's northern boundary for the first time this year, with a fire line more than 30 kilometres long along its north-eastern edge. Community and Borneo Nature Foundation fire teams had, as of 3 September, kept the flames largely to sedge and open peat, but around 45,000 young trees were lost at the Hiu Putih reforestation site. In West Kalimantan, fire has come within 200 metres of the Rangkong research station in Gunung Palung National



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Park, one of the longest-running primate field sites on Borneo, and orangutans have been seen fleeing the burning forest. Gunung Palung also supports Bornean white-bearded gibbons, which have been studied there since the 1980s. On Sumatra, the provinces of South Sumatra, Jambi and Riau, three of the worst affected, lie within the range of the agile gibbon (*Hylobates agilis*) and the siamang (*Symphalangus syndactylus*), both listed as Endangered. Peat-swamp forest of this kind is highly flammable once degraded and drained, and fires here can burn for weeks, releasing thick smoke and destroying habitat that will take centuries to regenerate naturally. Gibbons almost never come to the ground, so they cannot easily cross burned or open land to escape the flames. Those that survive are often left stranded in small, isolated patches of forest with too little food and no way to disperse.

Gibbons are highly vocal animals, and their loud morning songs are central to defending territory, maintaining pair bonds and locating mates. During the 2006 Kalimantan fires, research found that gibbons called less often and sang shorter songs on smoky days (Cheyne, 2008, *American Journal of Primatology*, 70(4), 386-392). Reduced singing during heavy smoke is consistent with respiratory irritation, and a comparable pattern has since been documented in wild Bornean orangutans, whose vocal behaviour also changes with wildfire smoke exposure (Erb et al., 2023, *iScience*). Gibbons breathe the same smoke-laden air as the people living alongside them, and there is every reason to expect they suffer similar respiratory harm, on top of habitat loss and disruption to the behaviours that keep wild populations viable.

Impacts on people

The same fires are a public health emergency for the millions of people living across the affected provinces. In the seven worst affected Indonesian provinces, recorded cases of acute respiratory infection more than doubled in just over a week, from 50,891 on 1 September to 113,336 on 9 September, and children aged five and under account for nearly a quarter of these cases. More than 12.5 million people in these provinces have been exposed to the haze, and hospitals have reported emergency departments under severe pressure. In neighbouring Sarawak, weekly asthma cases rose from 219 to 1,811 and conjunctivitis cases from 146 to 720 over a single week in late August as haze worsened. Several hundred schools across Sarawak were closed, keeping around 200,000 children at home, and schools in Central and West Kalimantan, Brunei and parts of the Philippines have also moved to remote learning. Outdoor events, sports fixtures and cultural gatherings have been cancelled or moved indoors across the region.

These impacts fall hardest on children, older people and those with existing respiratory conditions, and on rural and indigenous communities living closest to the fires, who have the least capacity to leave the smoke behind.

What is needed

The SSA calls, on a factual and non-political basis, for these fires to be brought under control as swiftly as possible. Fires on this scale threaten globally important gibbon and orangutan populations, damage carbon-rich peatland that will take centuries to recover, and put the health of millions of people at risk across national borders. This is not a problem any one country can absorb alone. With the fires forecast to burn for at least another month, the coming weeks are critical.

We ask the international community to give the 2026 Indonesian fire season the sustained attention it warrants: technical and financial support for firefighting, including the community fire teams working on



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the front line, and for peatland rewetting, investment in early warning and hotspot monitoring, and long-term funding for community-led fire prevention in the landscapes where gibbons and people share the same forests, and the same air. Protecting fire-prone peat-swamp landscapes protects gibbons and the people who live alongside them. This call is consistent with Resolution 8.115, *Strengthening gibbon conservation through collaboration and synergy*, adopted by IUCN Members at the 2025 World Conservation Congress in Abu Dhabi, which commits the international community to greater collaboration, funding and habitat protection for gibbons, including preventing the habitat loss that fire causes.

Sources

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- [Indonesia battling wildfires as smoke haze spreads as far as the Philippines – ABC News](#)
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- [The Guardian \(21 September 2026\) ‘The physical toll is visceral’: How Indonesia’s fire haze affects millions, visual guide \(K. Lamb\)](#)
- [Why Southeast Asia is facing a haze crisis – TIME \(17 September 2026\)](#)
- [Wildfire map spotlight: Indonesia forest and peatland fires, September 2026 – IQAir](#)
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- [IUCN \(2025\) Resolution 8.115, Strengthening gibbon conservation through collaboration and synergy. World Conservation Congress, Abu Dhabi](#)