KEMENTERIAN TENAGA DAN SUMBER ASLI

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A new branch of little apes

Distinct rare gibbon population discovered in Peninsular Malaysia



A stel-lar discovery: Scientists have found a subspecies population of the endangered white-handed gibbon in Peninsular Malaysia which may have evolved in isolation.

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PETALING JAYA: A local study on the endangered white-handed gibbon, including those of the species that have been illegally held captive, has led to the discovery of a distinct population in Peninsular Malaysia which may have evolved in isolation.

Announcing this on social media, the Wildlife and National Parks Department (Perhilitan) said the newly identified population of "little apes" is a southern subspecies of white-handed gibbons known scientifically as the Hylobates lar.

The white-handed gibbon, also known as the lar gibbon, is listed as endangered under the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Results of the local study, which was conducted by scientists from Perhilitan, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, were published on the peer-reviewed journal *ZooKeys* last December.

The discovery of the subspecies population came about after a genetic assessment was conducted on 12 gibbons that had either been rescued, surrendered or seized from the illegal pet trade, private collectors, or plantations from different parts of the peninsula.

As per the requirement of Perhilitan's Primate Rehabilitation Programme, these captive gibbons had to undergo a series of procedures and assessments where their taxonomy and genetics were examined before they could be released into the wild.

The team then discovered the previously unknown population with unusual mutations.

"The study will help with the plans for the translocation and reintroduction programme to release the white-handed gibbons, particularly those which had been surrendered or confiscated, into their original habitat," said Perhilitan.

Citing previous studies, the research team said there could be a possible northern population that might have originated from the region between the Isthmus of Kra, Surat Thani-Krabi depression in Thailand and the Kangar-Pattani line.

The differences between these two populations, it said, would warrant the two groups to be managed separately.

"The distinguishable differences between the postulated northern and southern populations warrant their treatment as separate management units (MUs), a component within the Evolutionary Significant Unit (ESU)," the study read.

Although treated separately, due to the remnant populations of the gibbons showing signs of inbreeding depression or increased fragmentation, mixing (translocation) between the two MUs are permittable," it added.

An ESU is a population that is considered distinct for purposes of conservation.