

BAWANGLING NATURE  
RESERVE, HAINAN  
ISLAND, CHINA

For many centuries in China it was not a good idea to displease the emperor. For those who did, the punishment was swift and sure. They were exiled to an island thought of as a mere swampy backwater. So remote was Hainan Island, whose name in Chinese means "south of the sea," that it was better known by its unofficial name **"The End of the Earth."**

A misty mountain landscape with dense green foliage in the foreground. The background shows rolling hills and mountains shrouded in a thick layer of white mist or fog. The foreground is dominated by the dark, silhouetted branches and leaves of a tree, partially obscuring the view of the mountains.

# journey's end

saving the hainan gibbon

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THERE ARE ONLY  
15 HAINAN GIBBONS  
REMAINING IN THE WORLD,  
ALL OF WHICH LIVE IN THE  
BAWANGLING RESERVE.  
THE MAIN THREAT TO  
THE HAINAN GIBBON IS  
HABITAT DESTRUCTION  
CAUSED WHEN POOR  
LOCAL MINORITY  
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CUT DOWN TREES IN THE  
RESERVE TO SELL THE  
TREE PARTS FOR THEIR  
MEDICINAL PROPERTIES.

WU WEI

HOME INTERIOR, DAYAN  
LAICUN VILLAGE NEAR  
BAWANGLING RESERVE.

■ Times have changed quite a bit on Hainan, located in the South China Sea 500 kilometres southwest of Hong Kong. Because it is home to the nicest beaches in China it is a popular honeymoon and vacation destination for people from the mainland. Hainan Island is now more commonly known to the Chinese as the “Hawaii of China.” But oddly enough to those outside of China, Hainan still appears to be the end of the earth. Out of 417 pages of one very popular China guidebook, only three paragraphs are devoted to Hainan Island. At 33,940 sq. km., Hainan is the world’s 39<sup>th</sup> largest island, about the size of Taiwan. It is home of the Li minority people and it is the only place in the world to find the Hainan gibbon, arguably the world’s most endangered primate.

After our arrival on Hainan, we head off from Changjiang City to make our way to the Bawangling Nature Reserve, the only home of the Hainan gibbon. It is 34 degrees – unusually hot for Hainan even though it is located just below the Tropic of Cancer. On the way we pass banana and mango trees, rice paddies and seemingly endless rubber plantations. Tree after tree has been tapped and the viscous white liquid creeps down the tree trunks on its journey to the collection pots hanging on the bark below. At one time this was lush natural rainforest, but it has now been cut down to make room for these rubber plantations. As we get closer to the reserve we come across many local farmers setting large areas of trees on fire to clear the forest for slash and burn agriculture. Because of the relatively small amounts of soil on the rainforest floor these slash and burn plots can only be farmed for a few years before all the soil becomes depleted. The farmer then moves on and the whole process begins anew.



**THE AUTHOR, DUANE SILVERSTEIN, AT BAWANGLING RESERVE RANGER STATION.**



To protect the highly endangered gibbon, in 1980 the Chinese government established the 2,100 hectare Bawangling Nature Reserve in the Yajiadling mountain range of western Hainan Island. Upon arrival at the remote reserve we are greeted by one of the leading experts on the Hainan gibbon, Wu Wei. Wei, a soft spoken young man whose glasses and quiet demeanor seem out of context with his garb of camouflage outfit, anti-leech socks and hiking boots, is devoting his life to studying and protecting the Hainan gibbon, also known as the black capped gibbon or *Hylobates cancolor*.

Wei tells us "there are only 15 Hainan gibbons remaining in the world, all of which live in the Bawangling Reserve. The main threat to the Hainan gibbon is habitat destruction caused when poor local minority villagers illegally cut down trees in the reserve to sell the tree parts for their medicinal properties."

I have come to the Bawangling Reserve as director of Seacology, the world's premier non-governmental organization with the sole purpose of preserving marine and terrestrial island environments throughout the globe. Seacology ([www.seacology.org](http://www.seacology.org)) specializes in "win-win" projects where islanders receive a critically needed benefit they request in return for making an important sacrifice on behalf of the environment.

In this case Seacology asked Dr. Xiaoming Wang, vice-president of East China Normal University, what incentive we could give to the people living in and around the reserve to induce them to stop cutting down the trees. Dr. Wang responded that the villagers living near the Bawangling Reserve often cannot afford to send their children to middle school. So in return for the villagers agreeing not to cut down any plants or trees from the reserve, Seacology is providing scholarships for middle school age kids from the four villages nearby the reserve.

Wu Wei leads us on our hike into the Bawangling Reserve. We are immediately struck by the noise of the insects; so loud it sounds like a heavy duty machine operated drill. We pass several tall podocarpus trees whose small colorful fruit is a major staple of the Hainan gibbon diet. We reach the observation point overlooking one of the mountain ridges where the Hainan gibbons live, but it is completely buried in fog. Wei takes the opportunity to tell us more. "Less than ten percent of the reserve has escaped habitat destruction," he says. According to Wei one of the major obstacles to protecting the Hainan gibbon is that grazing of buffalo is still permitted in certain parts of the reserve. "Not only do these animals eat many plants but it gives poachers an excuse to come into the reserve by pretending they are searching for their buffalo." Just as Wei finishes speaking the fog lifts and in less than one minute very steep and strikingly beautiful mountain ridges appear right out of Shangri-La.

At the same time as if on cue, Dr. Pierre Moisson joins us in the reserve. Dr. Moisson, director of the Mulhouse Zoo in France, confirms that the Hainan gibbon is critically endangered. The Chinese government has not yet given permission to



**DUANE SILVERSTEIN DISCUSSES THE FUTURE OF THE HAINAN GIBBON WITH DR. LIANG WEI.**

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FOR SURE  
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DR MOISSON

FOUR HAINAN GIBBONS -  
NOTE THE BABY IN THE  
MOTHER'S LAP. THIS  
REPRESENTS APPROXIMATELY  
25 PERCENT OF THE ENTIRE  
HAINAN GIBBON POPULATION.

scientists to take blood samples and because contact with this gibbon has been so rare, according to Dr. Moisson “we do not yet know for sure whether the Hainan gibbon is a species or a subspecies.”

It is now time to visit some of the nearby villages, home of the Li minority people. The Li people first settled Hainan Island 5,000 years ago. They make up one-eighth of the 8,000,000 population of the island. We are led in this visit by Dr. Liang Wei, a professor at Hainan Normal University. Dr. Wei is a very important person on Hainan and is in charge of educational programs on the island. He is also the director of the Hainan Education Centre of Environment and Ecology which oversees Seacology's scholarship-for-habitat conservation program. Dr. Liang Wei is very enthusiastic about the program. According to Dr. Wei, “Before the Seacology agreement, the villages used to battle with the reserve staff. Now because of the scholarships they work together. In fact, villagers recently told rangers about 12 poachers in the reserve, something they never would have done before.”

Seacology has now provided 250 scholarships for the local students. The rangers think the scholarships are working, researchers such as Wu Wei think they are working, but do the villagers feel the same way? In the village of Xin Feng we stop and ask one parent, Lim Jianfong what he thinks. He quickly rushes into his house and shows us his signed agreement. According to Lim, “I am happy with the agreement because the donation really helps my family.” This seems to be a widely shared sentiment.

Photo: Chen Qing



ADOBE PUSHES THE BOUNDARIES OF DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY AND IMAGING WITH DEBUT OF PHOTOSHOP CS2

**FARMER PRACTICING SLASH AND BURN AGRICULTURE NEAR BAWANGLING RESERVE.**



That night back at our home base in the town of Changjiang, Wu Wei shows us the only video in existence of the Hainan gibbon. A dark black male and an orange colored female are near the top of the forest canopy when they notice one of the rangers filming them from down on the ground. In a moment that fascinates us all the male then steps in front of the female and spreads his body to protect her. It is difficult to contemplate how humans can be on the verge of eliminating such a noble creature.

The video then captures two poachers working together to cut down a tree valued for its alleged medicinal properties. Just as the tree is cut down they notice the ranger filming them and they flee, leaving their tools behind. The contrast between the videotaped behavior of the gibbons and the behavior of the poachers is quite remarkable.

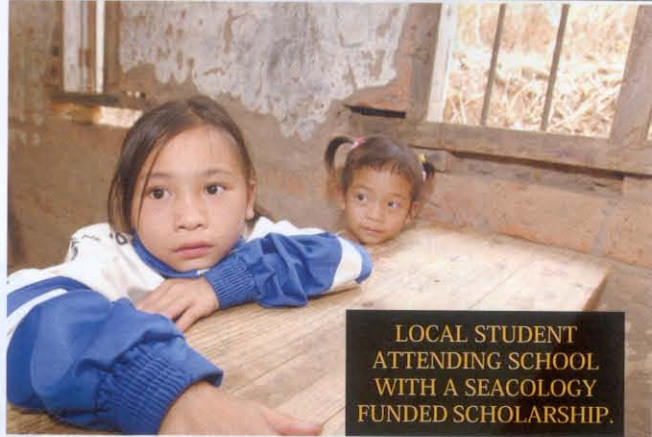
Hainan Island is home to another endangered species: the Hainan Eld's deer. In 1976 the Eld's deer population was reduced to 26 individuals, nearly poached out of existence because of its alleged medicinal properties. While on Hainan we came across small packets of deer antler paste, which supposedly has aphrodisiac properties, on sale for 800 Yuan. This is more than one month's wages for the average worker on Hainan.

In 1976 the Hainan Daitan National Nature Reserve was established. Due to the dedication of its director Li Shan Yuan and professor Yuan Xi-Cai the reserve has been a big success. The seventy year old Yuan Xi-Cai has been working on various conservation projects throughout China for over forty years. He does not seem to have slowed down at all during this time and he still speaks with passion and a glimmer in his eye. It is with great pride that he informs us that from a population of only 26 there are now over 1,600 Hainan Eld's deer in Daitan and they have begun placing some in other reserves.

It is often said that the pessimist sees the glass half empty while the optimist sees it half full. What then of the fate of the Hainan gibbon? Those who want to see the glass as half empty might say that there are just 15 of these gibbons left and they only give birth every two to three years.

Those who want to see the glass half full would say that, though there are only 15 of these gibbons left, there were only seven Hainan gibbons in 1978. The raw numbers might not sound so impressive but this represents more than a 100% increase in the population. Optimists might also point out the very successful experience with the Hainan Eld's deer, the incredible dedication of the rangers and researchers working to protect this gibbon, the fact that for the first time the villages in and around the Bawangling Reserve are working closely with the rangers, and note that the world has not had a primate extinction in over 100 years.

We can endlessly debate whether the glass is half empty or half full for the Hainan gibbon. The experienced Professor Yuan Xi-Cai sums up the debate nicely, "As long as there is a chance, we should continue to try to save the Hainan gibbon." AGE O



**LOCAL STUDENT ATTENDING SCHOOL WITH A SEACOLOGY FUNDED SCHOLARSHIP.**



**THE HAINAN ELD'S DEER IS ALSO THREATENED. ITS ANTLER'S ARE USED FOR A PASTE SOLD FOR ALLEGED MEDICINAL PURPOSES.**