

Holger was feeling a little overwhelmed by all the attention. A new face in the house made him unsure of things, and he clung tightly to a bright red security blanket. When this failed to offer the required reassurance, he plunged a familiar thumb into his mouth and sucked. Being fully experienced in the ways of infants and in an attempt to gain the young one's trust, I resorted to smiles and sweet talk. The reward for my patience was an outstretched leg and a small leathery foot thrust bravely into my hand, the toes curling tightly around welcoming fingers. Such a simple gesture, but one not easily forgotten.

Holger, of course, is no ordinary youngster but a concolor gibbon. Now a charismatic and intelligent two-year old, he was rejected at birth by his captive parents. Pharanee and William Deters welcomed him with open arms, and young Holger joined more than thirty gibbons at Highland Farm just outside of Mae Sot in Tak Province.

Known as *chance* in Thai, gibbons became the mission of the Deters in 1991 when the first frightened and injured baby gibbon was brought to their door. A hunter had shot the mother, and the orphan – later named Chester – was deemed to have no value because of his injuries and was given to the Deters. The Thai-American couple, who had relocated to Mae Sot from the USA, was looking forward to a quiet and well-earned retirement, but Chester changed all that. As the surrogate parents struggled to learn about the habitat and behaviour of gibbons, it soon became apparent that the tragic fate of Chester's mother was an all too familiar story. It is believed that for every baby gibbon captured by hunters, another 2 youngsters and three parents have died in the process.

“Hunters pose one of the greatest threats to the gibbon population in Thailand, indeed in Southeast Asia. Mothers are frequently shot so that they can take the baby away. The youngsters are then sold as pets or used as an attraction in a bar,” explained William.

Resort towns such as Pattaya are common haunts for gibbons and their tormentors. Despite the fact that hunting and trading gibbons in Thailand is illegal, the legal system seems unable or unwilling to tackle the problem. Complacency and acceptance by tourists and the general public who are willing to hand over a few baht to be photographed with a distressed or drugged animal certainly doesn't help the situation.

Although a baby gibbon seems alluring, it is a wild animal, and as it reached maturity at about four years of age, it becomes aggressive and unpredictable. The result, inevitably, is confinement or rejection by the owners.

Once the scale of the problem became known to the Deters, it was impossible for them to stand idly by. Most of the magnificent primates that the Deters care for have one thing in common: they are victims of neglect and abuse at the hands of humans. Denny, for example, was kept by her owner in a wooden box just sixty centimeters square. She was discovered in a pitiful condition, almost hairless and suffering from wasted muscles.

When not confined to cage, Mimi, another tragic case, was led around the streets of Bangkok to be photographed for money. She climbed a pole in the city and grabbed hold of an electric cable. The resulting burns to her left forearm and lower left leg were so severe that they had to be amputated. She also lost the sight in one eye. No longer of any use to their owner, Mimi was discarded. The Deter's trip to Bangkok to rescue her also brought the news of another young gibbon named Jerry whose owner had kicked him so hard that he suffered terrible hip and spinal injuries. Unable to leave this victim of brutality with his keeper, William and Pharanee returned with Jerry, too.

It is a sad irony, but due to maltreatment and long periods of confinement, the gibbons become totally dependent on man. At Highland Farm, however, they are offered a safe haven and unconditional love. Although there is no cure for the physical scars, the love and devotion that the Deters give to the gibbons has gone a long way toward healing the deep emotional wounds.

A major factor in the seemingly endless supply of orphaned gibbons is the continued destruction of their natural habitat. Truly arboreal creatures, and perhaps among the world's greatest acrobats, gibbons have little chance of survival if current levels of deforestation and human encroachment continue. Inhabiting the upper canopy of the forest, the gibbons are capable of leaping gaps greater than ten meters while traveling at swift speed. These shy and reclusive creatures are a threat to no one. Yet, in Southeast Asia the gibbon has been hit harder than any other primate. A visit to the Myanmar border market of Tachileik, opposite Mae Sai, where vendors openly sell the skulls of gibbons and other primates, serves as a grisly reminder that time is running out if we are to save these fabulous creatures. Although no primates have become extinct within the last hundred years, scientists believe that about 20 percent face that prospect over the next twenty years. The gibbon is one of them. Of the nine species world-wide, all are seriously endangered.

The Deters were quick to recognize the importance of education in the struggle to improve the current situation, and Highland Farm embarked on a number of programs to help address the problems. Raising public awareness of the gibbons' plights is seen as paramount to bringing a halt to the trade in youngsters.

"Getting people to understand the cruelty involved, and to resist the temptation to buy a baby or give money to be photographed with one is essential. We need to take the price off the head of the youngsters and in that respect everyone has a part to play in saving the gibbon. Losing that fight will mean that one day Thailand's entire gibbon population will be viewed through the bars of a cage. That is a high price to pay and a very sad prospect," says Pharanee.

Since Chester came to Highland Farm nine years ago, more than 14,000 visitors and school children have come through the farm to learn about the gibbons. None fail to be touched by the experience.

For those interested in serious research into gibbon behaviour, the Deters also allow students and professionals to stay and study at the farm. There is also an Adopt-a-Gibbon scheme. All these programs are designed not only to increase understanding but also to raise much-needed funds. Highland Farm is a private concern and we rely on our own finances to keep the place going. The generous contributions of volunteers and guests are always welcome and play an important part in the continual development of the sanctuary," explained Pharanee.

It's a task that cannot be taken lightly. Each year the number of gibbons at Highland Farm increases, and with the average gibbon life span of forty years, plans for the future are essential. Despite their heroic efforts and undeniable commitment, the Deters are only picking up the pieces thoughtlessly dropped and ignored by a society that seems to care little about its indigenous species. The real battle is to win the hearts and minds of a nation.

William added thoughtfully, "Often described as the songbird of the primates because of a beautifully musical call that resonates through the treetops for well over a kilometer, the gibbon has made its way into Thai mythology. For the forests of Thailand to fall silent and for the gibbon to be condemned to the pages of a storybook would be a tragedy heard by all over the world."

Holger suddenly released his grip on my finger and quickly withdrew his outreached leg. Wrapping his long arms around Pharanee and clinging tightly he, like more than thirty others, felt safe and secure in her presence.