



The Wli Waterfalls are one of the top tourist draws in eastern Ghana, and the cliffs alongside the falls are home to several thousand straw-colored fruit bats “ large and ecologically vital animals that also captivate tourists.

But these and other bats of Ghana are continually losing their habitat to expanding agriculture and their lives to increasing numbers of bushmeat hunters. Such threats stem largely from an almost-total lack of accurate knowledge about bats and the economic benefits they provide the roughly 3,000 residents of the Wli Traditional Area.

Reuben Ottou and colleagues at the Ghana Wildlife Society used a BCI Global Grassroots Conservation Fund grant to begin educating the local residents, whose support is essential to bat conservation in Ghana.

First, they surveyed 130 community members, most of them farmers, about their knowledge and attitudes toward bats. Eighty-three percent felt that bats are primarily a good source of food and medicine; 30 percent thought bats are really birds; and just 16 percent thought bats help regenerate forests and control disease by consuming insects.

A surprising 21 percent in our survey were convinced that bats defecate through their mouths. This was probably due to the fact that fruit bats crush fruit so they can eat only the juice and pulp, while they spit out the fibers, seeds and rinds.

Ottou and his team designed an educational program to counter the misconceptions and demonstrate the value of Ghana's bats, especially the straw-colored fruit bats. These bats, for example, are critical seed dispersers for the economically vital Odum tree, which is threatened in Ghana due to overharvesting. Its wood is prized for furniture and construction, among other uses.

Over several months, the conducted community meetings at area villages, conducted colorful bat-education programs at junior high schools. Subsequent surveys found significantly improved knowledge, as 78 percent of those surveyed agreed bats are a source of income, 89 percent agreed they were mammals, only 6 percent thought they defecate through the mouth. A very encouraging 72 percent now know they help control insects and regenerate forests.

The positive results were much more striking among children than adults, a testament to the difficulty of changing long-held perceptions of adults.

The challenges in conserving these straw-colored fruit bats and the other bats of Ghana are daunting, but our initial results are encouraging. People will protect these animals when they realize how important bats really are to their own well-being.

BCI Members can read the whole story of the bats of Ghana in the Summer issue of BATS magazine. You can help Bat Conservation International support conservation actions around the world at www.batcon.org/donate.

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