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Banishing the Vampires of the Jungle

A remote village finds a new appreciation for bats

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Pushing the thought of my mother's trepidation to the back of my mind, I climbed into the small, single-engine plane and took my seat on a sack of rice. With my knees near my shoulders and my head wedged against the ceiling, the pilot gave me a thumbs-up, and I was on my way to A'Ukre, a remote village hidden deep in the Amazon jungle of Brazil.

With the support of Bat Conservation International, I was returning to this traditional, indigenous village in hopes of helping to solve a serious vampire-bat problem without harming the many beneficial bats of the region.

A'Ukre is one of 10 small villages in the Kayapó Indigenous Area (KIA). Only a few thousand people live in the KIA, which is more than twice the size of Costa Rica. Although A'Ukre isn't much to look at – 29 rough houses arranged around a central Takana, or Men's House – the pristine forest that surrounds it is home to many species of plants and animals.

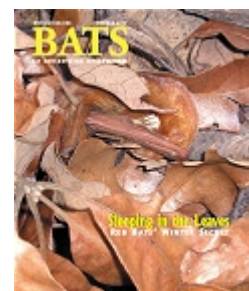
The Kayapó still live a largely traditional lifestyle with their own language, elaborate rituals and festivals, and intricate body painting. Feather headdresses and jewelry made of teeth and bones are often worn, and bows and arrows continue to be used. Most resources are obtained from hunting, fishing and small-scale agriculture, and villagers have limited contact with the larger Brazilian society.


I became acquainted with the Kayapó in 2002, when I was conducting graduate research at Pinkaití, a field station about 7 ½ miles (12 kilometers) upriver from A'Ukre. During the 1990s, the villagers had sold much of the highly valuable mahogany found in their territory. But, in partnership with Conservation International, they established a 31-square-mile (8,000-hectare) forest reserve (Pinkaití), where stands of mahogany trees remain intact. Because mahogany trees are widely dispersed, only a few trees per acre are usually harvested. My research, supported by two BCI Scholarships, examined the impact of this type of logging on bat communities.

During my time at Pinkaití, I was constantly in awe of my field assistants from A'Ukre. Their forest skills and knowledge of plants and animals were incredible. They expertly navigated boats around treefalls and other obstacles at night, built rain shelters from vegetation in minutes and scaled trees with the grace and agility of squirrels.

After learning a bit of the Kayapó language, I began to understand why most villagers were convinced that bats are dangerous. The common vampire bat (*Desmodus rotundus*) was causing significant problems in A'Ukre. Although rarely encountered in undisturbed forest, vampires can become a nuisance in areas with a readily available food source, and the village was host to an unusually large population of them.

Because homes in A'Ukre had many openings, vampire bats were frequent indoor visitors. Villagers were discussing hunting or poison to resolve the problem – and that would



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doubtless kill many of the fruit-, nectar- and insect-eating bats that are vital to the region's environmental health.

A more effective solution would be to keep bats out of houses by blocking all the openings. But because A'Ukre has few sources of income and all supplies must be flown in, the cost of screening the houses was well beyond the village's means.

Enter BCI. I approached BCI's Global Grassroots Conservation Fund, hoping it might fund a project that not only protected an entire village from vampire bites, but also helped conserve other bat species that were likely losing their natural roosts to the vampires. BCI agreed, which sent me back to A'Ukre in the fall of 2003.

The plan was simple: Cover all openings with coarse mosquito netting so the bats could no longer get inside the houses. The work was hot and dirty but very successful. After three weeks, each of the 29 homes in the village was completely screened and vampire-free.

An unforeseen payoff of the project has been a distinct change in villagers' understanding of bats. The field guides I had brought with me helped convince people that many types of bats existed and that most are important to the health of their forest. Initially, children would stop by my house to look at the pictures of bats in the field guides. But soon both adults and kids were showing up, often too many to fit in my house.

A field assistant named Nhepre, which coincidentally means "Little Bat," was instrumental in changing negative attitudes toward bats. He regularly corrected people who mistakenly identified foraging insect-eaters as vampires. Nhepre also proved adept at capturing bats that were roosting in houses, and these live bats helped educate villagers about the diversity of tropical bats and the important roles that bats play in tropical forests.

A bat that lived in my own house also was helpful in changing people's perceptions. Many villagers offered to kill it for me, but I pointed out this was a fruit-eating bat that wouldn't harm me. I knew that attitudes in the village had changed when people began making special visits to the house to see my resident bat.

It has now been several months since the screening project was completed. A lack of telephones and email prevents correspondence with my friends in A'Ukre, but I recently spoke with a fellow student who had just returned from the KIA. The exclusion project is still working, and it seems that some of the village children named the bat in my house after me. It now has several companions, and their antics entertain the youngsters.

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