

## VOLUME 26, NO. 1 Spring 2008

### Meeting the Challenge in the Philippines

Allies and partners spread bat conservation around the islands

David Waldien

A solitary fruit bat hung lifeless in a fishing net draped across the entrance to Manan-Aw Cave, a tragic symbol of the slaughter wrought by hunters the night before. A few days later, our bat-use assessments took us to Baga Cave, where we walked into a wall of smoke at the entrance. We found a smoking torch of palm fronds and the burned-out remnants of other torches near the entrance, but the cave was so choked with smoke that our survey team could not go further. Nearby, we found a local family eating lunch. Fruit bats were the main course.

Survival can be extremely difficult for bats in the Philippines, and their conservation is still a rare concept. But BCI and a passionate partner named Norma Monfort have established a beachhead of sorts at Monfort Cave, which shelters the world's largest-known colony of Geoffroy's rousette fruit bats (*Rousettus amplexicaudatus*). From that one site on Samal Island, a collaboration for bat conservation is spreading across the southern Philippines, winning new converts and energizing conservationists who have struggled for years against the tides.

The challenges are immense, but we are making progress – and new partners, allies and friends are key. Guarded optimism at long last is justified.


When we finally were able to enter Baga Cave, several dead fruit bats littered the cave floor. Deep inside, two Filipino miners were scraping up paltry collections of guano, all that's produced by the few insect-eating bats that had survived chronic disturbances and hunting. Unrestricted hunting, poorly timed guano mining and inappropriate recreation combine to threaten important bat colonies throughout the Philippines.

During a recent two-week visit, BCI Cave Specialist Jim Kennedy and I discussed cave-bat conservation with biologists, resource managers and cavers from throughout the Mindanao, Bohol, Cebu and Negros regions. Most shared tragic tales of unsustainable killing and mismanagement fiascoes that have devastated bat populations. They also shared a strong desire to work together on sustainable conservation that can restore and protect those battered bat populations.

BCI's Philippine initiative began in June 2006, when Monfort sought our help in assessing and conserving the bats at her family's cave on Samal Island. BCI Founder Merlin Tuttle and I visited the site and quickly confirmed that Monfort Cave is a stunning natural resource, with an estimated 1.8 million Geoffroy's rousette fruit bats roosting inside. We found that the cave was well above its carrying capacity for these bats, with thousands of them roosting in unfavorable locations where they are exposed to rats, pythons and other ground-based predators.

On the same trip, we found evidence that formerly significant bat colonies on the island had mostly abandoned other caves that had been exposed to bat-catching for food, guano mining, treasure hunting or tourism. Our two-week BCI visit also featured several lectures,



 [View PDF version](#)  
[4.35 MB]

workshops and press conferences, before concluding with key partners signing a cooperative management agreement for the long-term conservation of Monfort Cave (BATS, Winter 2006).

Less than a year after that initial visit, Norma Monfort established Monfort Cave as a major ecotourism destination and founded Philippine Bat Conservation (PBC), a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting bats and their habitats in the Philippines.

I returned in April 2007 to help Monfort officially introduce PBC and the cave at the Wildlife Conservation Society of the Philippines' annual conference. Our clear commitment to collaboration with local conservationists won early allies. Jodi Sedlock, a bat biologist from Wisconsin's Lawrence University who specializes in Philippine bats, joined me in developing a research plan to assess cave bats' status and needs and to identify major threats. This vital baseline study brings together such local partners as the Department of Natural Resources and the Central Visayas State College of Agriculture, Forestry and Technology.

Philippine Bat Conservation meanwhile, conducted its first bat-education workshop for teachers last November. Educators from carefully selected communities with the most pressing bat-conservation needs were trained to share their new appreciation of bats with their students and communities.

On our latest trip, in January 2008, Kennedy and I arrived as the First Annual Philippine Bat Festival began its weeklong run at the Monfort Conservation Park, which is designed around the cave. The festival's theme, "Happy Bats, Healthy Environment," summed up the critical roles bats play in the Philippine environment and economy, especially as pollinators of such crucial cash crops as durian fruit. The message was delivered to 400 registered participants and to hundreds more who never got around to registering. Bats are becoming trendy in the southern Philippines!

With the assistance of Philippine bat experts Nina Ingle and Rai Gomez of PBC, we led a Bat Research and Methods Workshop and a Cave Assessment Workshop as part of the bat festival. Biologists, students, conservationists and others came from as far away as Luzon, the northernmost of the Philippines' major islands, and their enthusiasm was inspiring. Some participants, especially members of the Davao Speleological and Conservation Society, Holy Cross of Davao College and Edge Outdoors, promptly put their new knowledge to work by joining our cave-assessment work the following week.

"Rapid assessments" – brief checks of potential bat caves for the presence of bats or for staining or guano accumulations, plus a preliminary appraisal of conditions and threats – were necessary given the time constraints. But we and other partners plan to return to more thoroughly examine those caves that showed the most evidence of past or present use by bats.

During BCI's 2006 visit to Samal Island, we surveyed eight caves. In our two hectic weeks in January 2008, we completed rapid assessments of 11 more caves on Samal and established GPS coordinates for 34 prospective bat caves, most of them suggested by local residents.

We also obtained information on another 66 caves, many with reports of historic bat colonies, around the Mindanao region beyond Samal. Most of these invaluable leads came from participants in our workshops.

Based on our rapid assessments, we assigned especially high priorities to two caves, Manan-Aw and Baga. Both showed evidence of sheltering thousands of bats and, as previously noted, of hunting and other disturbances. We will work with local partners to protect those bats. Preliminary assessments suggest six other caves may shelter significant colonies, but more on-site study is required to confirm that potential.

We still face enormous challenges in the Philippines, but with each visit we find more partners and colleagues who are committed to bat conservation.

Participants in our recent workshops have submitted five solid proposals for collaborative projects to assess bats' use of caves in Mindanao, Bohol, Cebu and Negros.

Monfort's Philippine Bat Conservation last year signed a formal agreement with Holy Cross of Davao College for joint efforts in education, conservation and research. And already this year, PBC, Monfort Bat Cave and Conservation Foundation and the University of the Philippines-Mindanao have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to collaborate on bat research, conservation and management issues on Samal Island and throughout Mindanao.

BCI and its growing list of partners have scattered the seeds of bat conservation widely. And working together, we are beginning the long process of nurturing our initial successes toward a robust national commitment.

DAVID WALDIEN is Co-Director of Programs for Bat Conservation International and a founding trustee of Philippine Bat Conservation.

You can help BCI support this vital Philippines initiative. Please contact [development@batcon.org](mailto:development@batcon.org).

All articles in this issue:

- ▶ [The Bat Grid](#)
- ▶ [Bats on the Wing in the Canadian Winter](#)
- ▶ [Teaching Colombian Children](#)
- ▶ [News Notes](#)
- ▶ [Meeting the Challenge in the Philippines](#)
- ▶ [Mysterious Bat Die-off Triggers Alarm](#)