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From Yoga to Bats in India

BCI's South Asia Liaison took a surprising turn to champion bat conservation
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When I came to India in 1976, I knew almost nothing about bats and could hardly care less. My plan was to study Sanskrit and yoga in Mysore for three months, then return home to California. Now, more than three decades later, I'm still here in India. And much of my life, including my position as BCI's South Asia Liaison, revolves around protecting these endlessly fascinating – but almost always persecuted – flying mammals in India and neighboring nations.

Across this broad region, my team and I conduct bat-research workshops, produce and distribute innovative bat-education materials, help establish bat clubs at schools and universities and maintain a vital information- and advice-sharing network for bat researchers, educators and advocates. Many of those we introduce to bats carry the message home to cities and villages throughout South Asia.

This unanticipated path that I have followed for so long began with a tiger cub.

Captivated by India, my three-month studies stretched into six years. Then, as I was finally preparing to return to the United States, I happened to visit the Mysore Zoo – and immediately fell in love with the little tiger. I was soon spending my mornings in a cage working with seven tiger cubs and my afternoons running India's first zoo society – Friends of the Mysore Zoo, which I founded. That led in 1985 to my starting the Zoo Outreach Organization (ZOO), which, among other things, emphasizes the role zoos can play in conserving threatened species.

In 1997, while planning the Biodiversity Conservation Prioritization Project's mammals workshop, I really got bat religion. I was astonished by bats' great diversity and value as pollinators, seed dispersers and insect hunters. India's 102 bat species accounted for a fourth of all Indian mammals, and fully half of them were listed in the 1994 International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) Red List as –Data Deficient, – which means we simply did not know enough about them to even assess their conservation status. Reports strongly indicated, however, that bats were declining across much of India because of widespread habitat loss, hunting and extermination.

That's also when I realized that, despite their ecological and economic values, bats were classified with mice and rats in India's Wildlife Protection Act as –vermin – and could be trapped, poisoned, shot, smoked or otherwise destroyed at will.

A major problem became clear at the workshop: bat scientists and conservationists were not only few in number but widely scattered across the country and working largely in isolation from one another. The bat working group cited the need of a society or –network – where bat workers could share data, hypotheses, ideas, techniques and all things of interest.

About a year later, I founded CCINSA – the Chiroptera Conservation and Information

Network of South Asia, called "sin-sah." That, of course, required the help of our team at ZOO, particularly Sanjay Molur, as well as prominent bat biologists Sharoukh Mistry of Westminster College in Pennsylvania, Ganapathy Marimuthu of Madurai Kamaraj University in India and Juliette Vanitharani of India's Sarah Tucker College. We were later joined by such international scientists as Paul Bates of the United Kingdom's Harrison Zoological Museum, plus Paul Racey of the University of Aberdeen and Tony Hutson of the UK's Bat Conservation Trust, co-chairs of the Bat Specialist Group of the Species Survival Commission of IUCN, and, of course, BCI Founder/Executive Director Merlin Tuttle.

Bat Conservation International has been invaluable to our efforts, first with several Global Grassroots Conservation Fund grants and, for the past two years, as a stable sponsor through my work as BCI's South Asia Liaison. The Chester Zoo of the United Kingdom was an early backer and continues its essential support. Much of the success with both ZOO and CCINSA resulted from what I learned in my work with the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group, part of IUCN's Species Survival Commission.

We have grown CCINSA to more than 150 members in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, plus 11 members and advisers from outside the region. As scientific communication improved and both new and existing data became accessible, the number of Indian bat species in the "Data Deficient" category fell to just 3 percent after a Conservation Assessment and Management Plan Workshop in 2000.

CCINSA immediately began lobbying to remove bats from the vermin category of the Wildlife Protection Act. We and others kept increasing the pressure until, in 2003, two species "Salim Ali's fruit bat (*Latidens salimalii*) and Wroughton's free-tailed bat (*Otomops wroughtoni*)" were listed on Schedule I of the Act, giving them the highest level of protection. The Ministry is currently considering protection for all bat species listed by IUCN as endemic and threatened.

Field-techniques training is a popular tradition with CCINSA, with at least one intensive field workshop in a different country each year. These sessions have increased the number of people interested in studying bats in South Asia. Led by such top scientists as Racey and Mistry, the workshops provide a thorough introduction to resident bats and their importance, behavior, diversity and conservation needs, as well as hands-on experience in studying, capturing, identifying and surveying bats in the field. We also stress the need for educating the public about bats and provide training and materials for doing so.

We have helped turn many distinguished academics and researchers into part-time educators of children, villagers and others. Watching these normally dignified scholars wearing bat masks, playing games and creating little drama presentations is terrific.

One of the most amazing instances of a community of bat lovers developing from nothing grew from a combination of field training and a kids' bat club. Several years ago, we started a CCINSA Bat Club program, and Geetha Shreshta, an educator in Nepal, set up one of our first clubs outside India. At that time, there were no bat biologists in Nepal. Geetha wanted an expert to talk to her bat club kids and eventually located an incipient professional bat lover, who led her to other interested young people. Almost all of them joined CCINSA.

In 2007, we organized a special three-day field workshop in Nepal for a large number of college students. Since then, young bat lovers have started their own networks, university bat

clubs, education programs and field research.

In India, we recently developed an unusual “poster in pieces,” as part of our assistance to Pterocount, a novel program conceived by Mistry and coordinated by Molur. Pterocount organizes volunteers to monitor local populations of Indian flying foxes (*Pteropus giganteus*) to determine the species’ status and develop a data-based conservation plan. In addition to the first systematic monitoring efforts, the project is giving residents a sense of ownership of colonies in their areas.

To help these volunteers identify bats, we developed a packet of 5- by 7-inch (13- by 18-centimeter) miniposters, each with an accurate image of a fruit bat on one side and species information on the other. We also adapted these to a baseball card-size packet for easy use in the field. And our educators created guidelines for building classroom projects around these colorful cards. They are proving popular throughout our networks.

Public education is essential to effective bat conservation, and we are constantly improving and expanding our repertoire of teaching materials. Over the years, we have distributed thousands of packets, posters, booklets, coloring books and educator guidelines to an array of target groups throughout the region.

Our model generally involves working with educators who conduct programs with CCINSA materials. The cost of postage and customs duties limit the materials we can send outside India, but we share everything through the faithful Internet.

One of our most popular teaching tools is a Bat Coloring Book. We combine large images of bats doing such batty things as eating fruit or hanging from a cave ceiling with information about their behavior and values. The books inspire many kinds of classroom activities and, most importantly, in a country where bats have a very negative image, they introduce youngsters to the benefits and beauty of these remarkable mammals.

We recently created educational drama kits that are proving particularly effective in villages where plays are often the only form of entertainment. Our kits contain masks of different kinds of bats and different people (trapper, housewife, government official, forester), along with sample plots and guidelines for staging an accurate and meaningful drama about such issues as poaching, extermination, disturbance of roosts and other threats to bats.

The power of knowledge “of accurate information widely shared” is having a positive impact on bat conservation throughout India and the countries that surround it. Education and grassroots action are keys to the future for bats in South Asia, and there is much, much more to do. But bats have many more friends here now and the future is rich with promise.

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