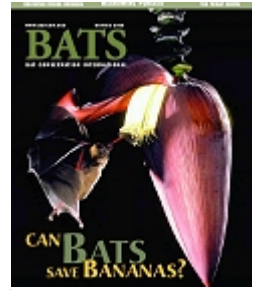


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Bat Conservation Takes Root in Nepal
Education makes a difference in the Madanpokhara Valley
Hari Adhikari



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The idea of bat conservation was almost unheard of in Nepal until a few years ago. Bats were totally ignored by the government and civic organizations and even by most conservationists. Few Nepalis knew much about bats, and most of what they thought they knew was wrong and usually damaging. Since about 2005, however, a small but enthusiastic corps of students and others has been organizing "bat clubs," conducting preliminary research and working to educate our neighbors about bats. Bat Conservation International has supported a number of those efforts, including my own recent work. But the challenge is great and we have only just begun. Bats are still mostly misunderstood and largely unwelcome in most of this wildlife-rich country.

BCI's Global Grassroots Conservation Fund has provided four grants to conservation projects in Nepal (see BATS, Winter 2005). The India-based Chiroptera Conservation and Information Network of South Asia (CCINSA) and its founder, BCI South Asia Liaison Sally Walker, initiated the first bat club and conducted a workshop in 2007, with BCI support, to teach college students the basics of field research and bat education.

As coordinator of the nonprofit Natural Resources Research and Conservation Center (NaReCon) in Pokhara, Nepal, I developed a program to educate students and community groups about the importance of bats and their conservation needs. NaReCon is dedicated to sustainable development and the conservation of Nepal's biodiversity through public participation. Bat Friends, a student group at the Institute of Forestry, Pokhara Campus, joined us in the project.

We concentrated our efforts on children, hoping that an early appreciation and understanding of bats might produce lifelong changes in attitudes toward these invaluable mammals. Our overriding message: conservation is the responsibility of all of us who share this Earth. We focused on the Madanpokhara Valley of Palpa District, an agricultural area with a rich biodiversity.

Before beginning our efforts in January 2008, we surveyed students and community residents to determine their attitudes about bats. Since the many insectivorous bats in the valley consume great numbers of insects, including many crop pests, the bats have always helped farmers by reducing the need for pesticides. Yet few local people were aware of the bats' contributions to agriculture. Misconceptions regarding bats – that they attack people and are blind, dirty, disease ridden or carry bedbugs – are common and bats are often casually exterminated.

In addition to insect-eating bats, some fruit-eating Indian flying foxes (*Pteropus giganteus*) roost in the area. In the town of Tansen, on the edge of the Madanpokhara Valley, a colony has been roosting in a temple courtyard and is protected there, but many bats of other species roost in at least seven nearby caves, where they face many threats.

After completing the surveys, we organized focus groups among community leaders, social

workers, local conservationists, journalists, teachers and others to discuss our plans and seek their suggestions for improving education and conservation programs. Their input was invaluable.

In the first phase of the project, we developed educational radio programs that were broadcast by Rupendehi FM and Radio Annapurna. Five episodes of 15 minutes each were produced to describe, in Nepali and local languages, various aspects of bat values and conservation needs. These stations' signals reach far beyond our project area, reaching up to five million listeners.

Although not part of our initial plan, we also took advantage of an opportunity to teach 15 Institute of Forestry students about bats and bat education. The homes of these Pokhara campus students are scattered across the nation. We supplied each student with bat-education materials and prepared them to share their new knowledge of bats with schoolchildren in their home communities.

Using information and photos from BCI, as well as our own research, we developed and printed a 24-page educational brochure in the Nepali language that describes bats, their value to both the local environment and economy and how they can be protected. We also produced a leaflet, "Bat Conservation in Palpa," and a poster, "Bat Conservation in Nepal," to increase awareness about bats.

We chose three area schools (River Valley English Secondary School, Shree Damkada Higher Secondary School and Shree Sharada Higher Secondary School) for our initial effort. All are near roosting sites of Indian flying foxes. About 40 students from each school were designated by administrators to participate, and we gave each one a packet of our materials and others provided by CCINSA.

Our teams took these students to bat-roosting areas, where we familiarized them with bats' physical features and their roosting and foraging needs. We helped the youngsters identify threats to bats and suggested ways in which they and their families and communities can improve things. We encouraged them to share their new knowledge with classmates and families.

We returned to the three schools where, after distributing bat-educational materials, we conducted bat essay and art competitions for students, awarding small prizes for the best entries. The children were surprisingly enthusiastic about this break from their normal school routine.

We also gave poster paper and drawing materials to groups of students and helped them draw posters and murals depicting various aspects of bats, which they displayed in school hallways.

The headmasters of schools in the Palpa District attended lectures and discussions on the importance of bats and committed to including bats in their regular curriculum. We gave each school a large number of our educational materials and other information on bats. Building on a CCINSA bat-education workshop that I recently attended, we provided special training to science and environment teachers so they can provide more detailed information to their pupils.

A follow-up questionnaire demonstrated a striking increase in basic bat knowledge and improved attitudes at the schools we visited. We believe our bat-education program can be

duplicated elsewhere in Nepal with similarly strong results.

In the future, we will try to expand our bat-awareness efforts with a multimedia approach, using newspapers, magazines, television and radio. We hope to initiate community-based bat-conservation programs, finding residents who are willing to take action and giving them a sense of ownership of the bats in their areas. And Nepal's growing number of bat advocates desperately need to establish a network of bat workers, bat clubs and organizations that can share what we are learning about the bats of Nepal. So much still remains to be done, but we are moving forward.

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All articles in this issue:

- ▶ [Bat Conservation Takes Root in Nepal](#)
- ▶ [Bats and Disappearing Wild Bananas](#)
- ▶ [Moving a Mountain for Big-eared Bats](#)
- ▶ [Rejuvenating Pacific Forests](#)
- ▶ [WNS: The threat grows](#)