


VOLUME 28, NO. 1 Spring 2010

Heroes, Not Villains

Education in Brazil replaces children's fears of bats

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When we first brought our Projeto MamÃ-feros Voadores “the Flying Mammals Project” to schools in Alagoas, Brazil, we asked the children what they thought about bats. The results of our survey were not encouraging: the consensus among these 5- to 12-year-olds was that bats are evil blood-drinkers that inhabit dark and sinister caves, useless creatures that should be eradicated.

A year later, after classroom lectures, bat-education games, hands-on activities, demonstrations and discussions, almost all of the 2,250 youngsters we encountered had discovered that bats are not villains, but heroes of nature “invaluable neighbors that pollinate plants and disperse seeds that are essential for keeping our forests healthy and growing.

This highly productive project in bat education and conservation was supported by a grant from the BCI Global Grassroots Conservation Fund. The AmanaiÃ© Foundation for Environmental Action, in partnership with the Federal University of Alagoas and QuÃ¢ntica Technical School and Research Center, developed and presented this bat-education program at 10 schools throughout Alagoas state on the northeastern coast of Brazil.

Bats are extraordinarily important to Brazil's forest ecosystems, which are under continuing threat from commercialization and urbanization. The many seed-dispersing bats especially are vital for the regeneration of cleared forestlands. More than 164 species of bats account for approximately 30 percent of all mammal species in Brazil, yet a pervasive lack of public knowledge of bats and their value is the greatest single barrier to their conservation throughout the country.

Our goal in this project was to work with schoolchildren as a key step in reaching families and communities with the facts to refute the countless, damaging myths about bats. This distressing public perception of bats stems in Brazil, as in most countries, from folklore, stories, movies and books that present bats as vicious, disease-ridden villains. A majority of the children questioned in our initial survey were convinced that "bats transform into rats when they get old." It doesn't help that Halloween is becoming increasingly popular in Brazil, with bats often getting a starring role as vampires.

After identifying the specific misperceptions among Alagoas youngsters, we built a strategy and designed educational materials and activities to demystify these remarkable animals and overcome the prejudices “while the kids are having fun. We carefully recruited and trained a small corps of young people to present our message “and perhaps to continue this educational mission on their own in years to come.

We developed colorful brochures, T-shirts, stickers, key chains, games and mask-painting projects, all designed to display the benefits of bats, their conservation needs and their places in nature. We prepared lectures, videos and even a cartoon about good and happy

bats. The children were uniformly enthusiastic and often intrigued by these surprisingly useful “and cute” animals that they had considered the stuff of nightmares.

Our work in Alagoas produced an unusual and unexpected opportunity that expanded our reach considerably. We were asked by a local unit of the Brazilian Army to teach soldiers how to explain the importance of the region's rich biodiversity to children and others at an upcoming Environment Day celebration. We discussed the benefits and needs of the varied animals of Alagoas, with an emphasis on bats, of course, and believe we helped create at least a few new soldier-ambassadors for conservation.

Our schoolchildren clearly began to appreciate bats, not just as the only mammals that can fly, but as wonderfully useful animals that live in colonies that can seem like well-organized communities. The children learned how bats serve human communities by eating pesky insects, pollinating plants whose flowers bloom at night and sowing seeds so the forests can grow. These kids even learned to identify some of the bat species and habitats around their hometowns.

Our efforts, meanwhile, were described in very positive and informative terms in several newspaper and magazine articles, as well as two television broadcasts and two radio interviews around the state.

Ten university students who participated in this bat-education program received college credit for their training and activities and are increasing their studies in biology, conservation or environmental education, with an eye to a future in ecology fields.

In Alagoas and throughout Brazil, the need for education remains critical to counter harmful myths and encourage bat conservation to expand. Our work continues as opportunities and funding become available. We hope to build on our progress by establishing a permanent bat exhibit in Alagoas where students can visit and find both fun and knowledge in exploring the world of Brazilian bats.

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Homegrown conservation programs are usually the most enduring, and BCI's Global Grassroots Conservation Fund supports these projects around the world. Your help is urgently needed. Please donate at www.batcon.org/donate

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