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Winning Allies for the Bats of Kenya  
Simon Musila and Judith Mbau

Kenya is home to more than 100 bat species, but these invaluable animals face an array of threats from human settlement and charcoal burning to witch doctors and agriculture. And there are few human allies willing to protect these little-known and often-misunderstood animals in Kenya. With the support of a BCI Global Grassroots Conservation Fund grant, we have begun an effort to educate local people along the Kenyan coast about the importance of the flying mammals and to provide skills that will empower them to conserve their bats.

Bats are found throughout Kenya, but most of their major roosts are outside the 10 percent of the nation's land that is designated as national parks and forest reserves. Beyond the protected areas, the goodwill of villages and towns is critical to any bat-conservation effort. Communities that become engaged in protecting bats and their habitats can make a great difference.

The two of us, both from the National Museums of Kenya, visited four sites along the coast to sample bat diversity and interview local residents about their knowledge and attitudes about bats and how the communities interact with bats.

We educated almost everyone we met about the benefits of bats in the region. By the end of October 2009, we had met with more than 300 individuals from four villages and completed 176 questionnaires. This information guided our planning for a December 2009 bat-awareness workshop at the Fort Jesus Museum in Mombasa, Kenya's second-largest city.

We found that villagers generally realized that bats provided such important ecosystem services as eating insects, seed dispersal and pollinating plants, although many were uncertain whether bats are mammals, birds or just vaguely strange creatures. The people's perceptions of bats were overwhelmingly negative. Many considered them to be messengers of evil, ghosts, bad omens or tools used by witch doctors to cast spells. Such attitudes lead to direct killing of bats, the felling of mango trees used as roosts, and attacking roosting bats with slingshots.

Kenya's coastal bats also suffer from frequent loss of habitat as forests are cleared for farming and human settlements, while bat caves are often overused for tourism and cultural ceremonies, and by witch doctors as sites for consultations with local residents.

Our workshop plans took on the goal of empowering local communities with real knowledge regarding bats. We invited residents of coastal communities who have demonstrated an interest in conservation through community-based organizations, primarily those involved in protecting "Important Bird Areas" — people who will share what they learn at our workshop with their neighbors and become active in bat conservation.

We prepared posters about bat species and their roles in the environment, and provided a booklet on bat identification that was prepared by Bat Conservation International for a 2001



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project in Kenya. PowerPoint presentations were prepared to discuss bat biology, ecological roles of bats and their conservation.

We used taxidermy bat specimens from the National Museums of Kenya to demonstrate bat diversity, handling and identification. Bat-capturing equipment was demonstrated, and participants produced a list of significant bat-roosting sites based on their personal knowledge of the coastal region.

Bat colonies are very poorly mapped in Kenya, so we (Musila and Mbau) subsequently visited most of the 39 sites listed to assess their status and identify high-priority roosts for conservation efforts. Kenya's coastal strip is rich in bat roosts, with a number of caves, as well as roosts in trees, especially mango and baobab trees in the villages, towns and in Mombasa City. Bats also were also reported roosting in many bridges and buildings, especially abandoned structures. The workshop chose two people as point-persons for continual mapping of additional bat roosts as they are identified along the south and north coast in Kenya.

This initial step toward bat conservation along coastal Kenya is, admittedly, modest. Yet there is reason for optimism. After our workshop and related outreach efforts, most people in our survey indicated that they would react positively upon seeing a bat. And most said that gaining better knowledge, protecting bat habitats, preventing disturbances and killing, and even building bat houses were important for saving the declining bat populations. They were also very willing to share the information with others.

That is not the same thing as actually taking such steps. We could not ascertain their interest in implementing bat conservation, although the possibility for change through continuous bat-awareness education seems clear. We hope to continue and expand this effort into the future by introducing bat houses, which do not yet exist in Kenya, to address the declining availability of natural roosts along the Kenyan coast.

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