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Friends of Fanihi

Going door-to-door for Marianas flying foxes

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Friends and neighbors often make the most effective teachers. And that's especially true on the small Pacific island of Rota, where some 3,200 people share 33 square miles (85 square kilometers) with a rare and waning population of Marianas flying foxes. So we looked to a few island residents for help in convincing the Rotanese to protect their magnificent bats from poachers.

All of the Marianas flying foxes (*Pteropus mariannus mariannus*) in the world “probably fewer than 6,000” live on a handful of Pacific islands, and they are fading fast. These bats are squeezed by habitat loss and occasionally hammered by the typhoons that sweep the region. But the most severe threat is illegal hunting. The Marianas flying fox, known locally as the fanihi, is considered a gourmet delicacy in the U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). The consequences are tragic.

Our Friends of Fanihi project is working to save this important species by building support and a sense of ownership of these beleaguered bats. Rota is home to a close-knit community, in which people feel accountable to one another, but not necessarily to outside agencies, laws or institutions. Successful outreach and education must involve local people teaching and influencing others on a personal level.

With support from a BCI Global Grassroots Conservation Fund grant, we recruited and trained four Rota residents to literally go door-to-door, informally educating their neighbors and families about why and how the fanihi should be protected.

Marianas flying foxes are declining rapidly across their entire range (the Northern Mariana Islands and Guam). The species is listed as threatened by the United States and endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Rota hosts the last viable population (approximately 2,000 bats) in the southern Marianas. But poaching is taking a frightful toll. From 2002 to 2009, Rota's fanihi population declined by an estimated 35 percent. Illegal hunters killed 10 to 14 percent of the Rota population in 2008 alone. This battered population clearly cannot sustain such damage and survive.

Hunting fanihi is illegal, but convincing residents to honor that ban is always difficult, especially in uncertain economic times. Enforcement of the hunting ban is desperately needed, but support from the community is absolutely essential to ensure the survival and recovery of the fanihi.

In October 2008, the nonprofit Rota Conservation and Ecotourism conducted its first outreach event for the Marianas flying fox during the annual San Francisco de Borja Fiesta on Rota. In addition to educating visitors, we also surveyed 101 adults and 32 children about their knowledge and perceptions of the bats.

These surveys found many misconceptions about the biology and ecology of the bats, the



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ability of the population to survive current hunting practices and what is needed to save this species from extinction in the Marianas.

I identified people interested in working for bat conservation and recruited four of them as educators for the Friends of Fanihi project. They learned the basics of the status, ecology, biology and conservation needs of the species and were trained to teach this information to friends, neighbors and family members.

With their help, I compiled a question-and-answer survey, along with a teaching guide, to serve as a framework for the discussions. Educators were taught to conduct these discussions in an informal manner so participants would feel more comfortable sharing their own ideas while learning scientific facts from someone with whom they are comfortable and familiar. Participants also received information brochures, bumper stickers and, for children, colorful stickers and temporary tattoos that promote fanihi conservation.

The surveys addressed many misconceptions that are common within the Rota community. Educators explained the importance of Marianas flying foxes in keeping the island's jungle healthy by pollinating flowers and spreading seeds. They stressed that Rota has the largest remaining population of fanihi in the southern Marianas, and if the species is to survive in this region, Rota is its last hope.

Our educators met with 301 adults on Rota (about 10 percent of the total population), and the general response of the community was positive and encouraging. At the end of each survey, participants were asked for written comments and suggestions. Ninety-seven percent of the 130 comments supported protecting bats and their habitats, continuing education programs and ensuring sustainable hunting practices.

Educators also shared Fanihi: A Cultural Digest, a film created by Jim Tharp, in which Rota residents discuss the cultural and ecological significance of fanihi and the need to preserve the species.

I led classroom presentations at three schools on Rota and three schools on Guam and also took youngsters on nature hikes during the annual Rota Ecocamp, where I discussed the benefits and conservation of flying foxes in the Marianas.

This program was definitely successful in getting the community to think about fanihi conservation in the Marianas and to at least begin building support for the bats. It also helped me to identify and refine the most successful approaches for local education and outreach programs. What we learned here will help guide much of our future bat-conservation efforts in Rota.

One idea that was strongly encouraged during this program was to establish a facility where the public could become more involved in the actual research, rehabilitation and conservation of fanihi. Rota, many participants said, should be the capital of fanihi conservation.

Therefore, I am currently working to develop plans and funding for an official Fanihi Research, Education and Conservation Center on Rota. I envision a place where both Rotanese and off-island visitors can learn about the fanihi and participate in their conservation.

The fanihi are still far from secure, but their future is beginning to show real promise.

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All articles in this issue:

- [Friends of Fanihi](#)
- [Ope'ape'a](#)
- [Hiding from the Lights](#)
- [Listening for WNS](#)
- [News & Notes](#)
- [The Memo](#)