

## VOLUME 29, NO. 2 Summer 2011

Battling Myths to conserve the bats of Ghana  
Reuben Ottou

The Wli Waterfalls cascade dramatically from a height of more than 200 feet (60 meters) into a scenic pool in the Agumatsa Wildlife Sanctuary in eastern Ghana. The falls are believed to be the highest in West Africa and are one of the top tourist draws in the region. The cliffs alongside the falls are home to several thousand straw-colored fruit bats (*Eidolon helvum*) – large and ecologically vital animals that also captivate tourists.

But these and other bats of Ghana are continually losing their habitat to expanding agriculture and their lives to increasing numbers of bushmeat hunters. Such threats stem largely from an almost-total lack of accurate knowledge about bats and the economic benefits they provide the roughly 3,000 residents of the Wli Traditional Area.

My colleagues and I, members of the Ghana Wildlife Society, used a BCI Global Grassroots Conservation Fund grant to begin educating the local residents, whose support is essential to bat conservation in Ghana.

Our first step was to collect data on local knowledge and attitudes about bats. We surveyed 130 community members, almost two-thirds of them farmers, and confirmed that we had a great deal of work to do. We found essentially no traditional beliefs or values that encourage protection of these bats and their habitat.

Eighty-three percent felt that bats are primarily a good source of food and medicine; only 58 percent knew they are mammals, while 30 percent thought bats are really birds; and just 16 percent thought that bats help regenerate forests and control disease by consuming insects.


A surprising 21 percent in our survey were convinced that bats defecate through their mouths. This was probably due to the fact that fruit bats crush fruit so they can eat only the juice and pulp, while they spit out the fibers, seeds and rinds. Plus, people see the fibers and seeds under the trees on which bats hang upside down.

Protecting these bats, especially from indiscriminate hunting, clearly requires the commitment of those who live in and near the sanctuary. But that support is unlikely without an awareness of the benefits of bats and their economic payoffs for continued tourism, healthy forests and sustainable timber production.

We designed our educational outreach to counter the misconceptions and demonstrate the value of the region's bats, especially straw-colored fruit bats – impressive creatures with wingspans of 30 inches (76 centimeters) or more. Research has proven, for example, that these fruit bats are by far the most important seed dispersers for the economically vital Odum tree, which is threatened in Ghana due to overharvesting. Its wood is prized for furniture and construction, among other uses. Straw-colored fruit bats are an important factor in the survival of this important tree in the Agumatsa area.

Over several months, we conducted community meetings at two Wli villages – Afegame



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and Agorviefe” to educate residents about the benefits of their bats. We also conducted bat-education programs at junior high schools. We used photos and other visual aids to show the many valuable activities of Ghana's bats. During these activities, we challenged schoolchildren to come up with messages for increasing awareness of bats and improving their protection. A few of their suggestions are:

Bats are not just fruit pests, they plant fruit trees;

When the last fruit bat dies the last fruit tree dies;

Protect bats for the benefit of man and the forest.

Subsequent surveys found significantly improved knowledge, as 78 percent of those surveyed agreed bats are a source of income, 89 percent agreed they were mammals, only 6 percent thought they defecate through the mouth, and a very encouraging 72 percent now know they help control insects and regenerate forests.

The positive results were much more striking among children than adults, a testament to the difficulty of changing long-held perceptions of adults.

We also trained two community members in basic bat-surveying techniques, including mist-netting. They are currently working as paid assistants for a researcher who is collecting data on bats in the sanctuary, and demonstrating with their paychecks a modest economic impact of the bats. The two are also among area youths who work as guides at the Wli Waterfalls, and now they provide information about the bats and their importance to local communities in their spiel for visitors.

Our first foray into bat education in the Wli Traditional Area generated considerable interest among these communities. A number of residents, especially teachers, are now requesting factual educational materials on bats to help sustain this awareness we helped to create. One goal of our program for the region is to develop and distribute locally relevant resources such as posters that illustrate key ecological benefits of fruit bats and brochures highlighting myths and facts about bats. We would also like to erect an educational exhibit on fruit bats at the A-Agumatsa Wildlife Sanctuary's visitor center.

Eventually, we foresee annual bat-awareness programs at schools throughout the region that work with our educational materials and feature student competitions for artwork and A-poetry that celebrate bats.

And to encourage sustainable bat conservation in the region, we envision workshops that introduce select college students to field-study techniques that could create and sustain an interest in bat research. Our proposed study sites are in areas with both large bat colonies and commercial mining sites, and we are seeking funding from Ghana's mining sector and other potential donors.

The challenges in conserving these straw-colored fruit bats and the other bats of Ghana are daunting, but our initial experience in the Wli Traditional Area is extremely encouraging. People will protect these animals when they realize how important bats really are to their own well-being.

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