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Bat Radio in Nepal

A broadcast campaign spreads the word about conservation

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Nearly 6 million people live in Nepal's Western Region, which spans the middle of the country and centers roughly on the scenic Pokhara Valley in the Himalaya Mountains. Only about half of them can read and write and many, especially in rural areas, are beyond the reach of television, the Internet and newspapers. Here, mass media mostly means radio.

With support from a BCI Global Grassroots Conservation Fund grant, we conducted a systematic, yearlong radio campaign to educate the public about bats and create interest in their conservation. The grant was made possible by Columbia Foundation of San Francisco, California.

We also succeeded in our goal of moving radio beyond simply delivering a message. Our radio programs were designed not only to disseminate information, but to gather it, as well. We were rewarded with new knowledge, shared by listeners, about bats and their roosts.

The Western Region is home to diverse bat populations. The first bat survey in the Pokhara Valley, also supported by BCI's Global Grassroots, documented 11 bat species (BATS, Winter 2005). But these bats face threats ranging from habitat loss due to logging and human expansion to tourism at bat caves and hunting for use in folk medicines.

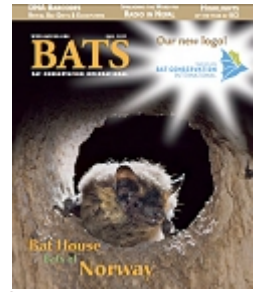
A few national and international conservation organizations had previously used radio programming to promote aspects of conservation. Those broadcasts, however, usually covered several themes in a single program, which typically means no issues were covered in depth. As a broadcast journalist, I wanted to approach radio-based education through a well-planned series of programs that focused on a single theme: bat conservation.


Our team of conservationists and broadcasters wrote, produced and broadcast three 15-minute episodes a week for nine months, from December 2008 through September 2009, on Radio Annapurna. The Pokhara-based FM station is popular throughout the Western Region.

We aimed our message primarily at farmers, tourist guides and people living near important bat roosts, all of whom are likely to encounter bats and benefit from them and to be in a position to improve their conservation. We also focused on teachers and students.

After collecting the needed information, we developed scripts that were intended to be accurate, straightforward and easy to understand. The programs were then recorded, edited and mixed with sound effects. We also produced a promotional jingle that was broadcast throughout the day to publicize the program and urge listeners to tune in.

Each Wednesday and Thursday, most of the program was devoted to information about bats – their unique biology and abilities, their environmental and economic value, the myths that surround them, the threats they face and how individuals and communities can help preserve them. About three-fourths of each Friday program consisted of a dramatic



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presentation that featured a schoolgirl named Rama, who talks to her family, friends and teachers about bats.

We also presented several shorter, regular features, such as local, national and international news about bats. We used a weekly quiz on bat facts to encourage audience participation and also to gauge public interest. We asked several questions, and listeners responded via mail, email, telephone and fax. Winners were awarded the Mammals of Nepal book. For a "Public Voice" feature, we visited and spoke with a wide range of residents, from tourist guides to students, about their views on bats and conservation and broadcast the interviews.

Finally, we ended each episode by explaining the conservation importance of identifying and locating bat colonies and asked the audience to send us any information about roosts in their area.

The project was planned and funded for seven months. At the end of that time, however, the radio station examined the popularity and participation of the 90 broadcast programs and offered to continue them for another three months without charge, for a total of 10 months of bat education.

To help gauge the educational impact of our radio programming, we arranged for students to answer a questionnaire before and after the programs. With the help of teachers, we tested the knowledge and attitudes about bats among students in grades 8 through 10 at two schools in the Pokhara Valley. The students were told of the bat-conservation programming before the first test.

Most students expressed positive attitudes about bats in both before and after surveys, but their knowledge about bats increased dramatically over the period. Only 10 percent of students correctly answered 12 questions related to bats in the pre-program survey. After the programs, the improvement was dramatic: 86 percent of the same students correctly answered all 12 questions.

The greatest audience response was through telephone calls, followed by postal mail, which was higher than email and fax feedback. Each program generated an average of about 14 phone calls, 7 letters and 4 emails.

Students and teachers were much more likely to respond to all parts of the program than the other targeted groups. The quiz section produced the most responses, and a few students contributed stories for use in the drama segments.

The response from tourist guides was especially gratifying, as nearly all expressed support for more bat-friendly tourism. They were concerned that cave bats could disappear without community support for their conservation. We also received reports of bat colonies in caves and tree roosts at 28 locations.

After our project was concluded, another team began its own series of bat-conservation radio programs. We feel confident that we have proven the potential, at least in Nepal, to improve bat education and community involvement through continuing, targeted radio programs.

ANJANA SHRESTHA is now Coordinator of Chandra Gurung Conservation Foundation for Participatory Biodiversity Conservation in Kathmandu, Nepal, and is active in a number of conservation groups.

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