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News & Notes

Building conservation in Southeast Asia

"Training and nurturing young scientists and conservationists is one of the most powerful approaches to building new bat-centered organizations, especially in the developing world."

Paul Racey, "Filling the Void: The Global Challenges. Facing Bat Conservation," BATS, Spring 2011

That is what the Southeast Asian Bat Conservation and Research Unit (SEABCRU) is all about: building a multinational bat-conservation community by recruiting, training and supporting local leaders for bat research and conservation.

Southeast Asia is one of the most biologically rich regions in the world, but rapid human-population growth and economic development threaten that remarkable biodiversity. Deforestation alone is expected to contribute to the global extinction of up to 20 percent of existing wildlife species in the region by 2100.

For bats, these impacts are magnified by widespread hunting of bats for food and traditional medicine and frequent disturbance of important cave roosts. With more than 300 species, Southeast Asia accounts for about a fourth of the world's bat fauna. But the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) reports that it has too little data to even determine the population status of 56 percent of bat species in the region. And among species for which data are available, about three-quarters are in decline. Conservation of Southeast Asia's bats is crucial. Tigga Kingston, a Texas Tech University biologist with broad experience in Southeast Asia, launched SEABCRU as a network for scientists and conservationists in 2007, during the first Southeast Asian Bat Conference in Phuket, Thailand. The conference noted that long-term bat conservation requires active partnerships and collaboration. Attendees identified four top priorities for bat research and conservation in Southeast Asia: cave bats, forest bats and flying foxes, plus a greater understanding of taxonomy. Initial funding came from the BAT Biodiversity Partnership.

The organization moved to a new level in June 2011, when the U.S. National Science Foundation provided five years of funding. Dave Waldien, BCI's Vice President of Operations and International Programs, serves on the Steering Committee along with other bat-conservation leaders from around Southeast Asia and the world.

More than 130 bat conservationists, researchers, educators and students have joined SEABCRU, and membership is still growing. Leadership teams for each conservation priority are mobilizing people and resources as they work toward ambitious goals over the next five years. The centerpiece of each priority plan features training and mentoring undergraduate and graduate students to build sustainable research and conservation efforts into the future.

Paul Racey urged us all to "roll up our sleeves and get to work." SEABCRU is at least one



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group that is taking that charge to heart in a collaborative effort to fill the conservation void across a broad swath of the globe.

Belly dancing for bats

BCI Members have always been innovative fundraisers on behalf of bats, but Kim Hall's "Belly Dancing for Bats" event at The Bug Theatre in Denver, Colorado, seems to have raised the bar. Kim, who sports a large tattoo of an Egyptian fruit bat on her back, has been belly dancing for years, teaches the art form and regularly gives professional performances. She also has a degree from the University of Maine in wildlife ecology and worked with bats during a stint at the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department. Now living in Colorado, she founded the local dance troupe Indigo Rain. The fundraiser, she says, reflects her two passions: bats and belly dancing. She and a number of her colleagues put on the show to help BCI's efforts to combat White-nose Syndrome. (The photo shows the Beledi Dance Caravan at the event.) They raised more than \$2,600.

Apply for a BCI Scholarship

Knowledge is crucial to protecting bats. And Bat Conservation International has been helping to increase scientific information about bats since 1990 through its worldwide Student Research Scholarship Program. Applications are now being accepted for the 2012 BCI Scholarships that support conservation-relevant research throughout the world. The deadline for completing online applications is December 15, 2011.

BCI has awarded 310 scholarships for research in 60 countries during the past two decades, including 19 for the current academic year to support projects in 11 countries and 10 U.S. states. In addition to increasing our knowledge about bats and conservation, these scholarships help support new generations of scientists, many of whom will lead bat conservation into the future.

Students enrolled in degree-granting programs at colleges and universities of any nation are eligible to apply for scholarships of up to \$5,000 each for the 2012-13 academic year. They are available to support research projects that pursue information of value to the conservation of bats and their habitats anywhere in the world.

Qualified research should address at least one of these issues: answering ecological or behavioral questions that are essential to conservation or management; resolving an economic problem that will improve support for conservation; or documenting key ecological or economic roles of bats.

Students in any degree-granting program are eligible to apply. These scholarships are competitive, and applications will be judged by a panel of non-BCI scientists. Awards are announced in the spring.

Applications must be completed online at BCI's website (www.batcon.org/scholarships) by December 15.

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A hero for bats

Norma Monfort, a dynamic BCI partner in the Philippines for five years, is being honored as a 2011 Disney Worldwide Conservation Fund Conservation Hero. The award recognizes "extraordinary individuals who are passionate about protecting animals and habitats in

areas of critical concern."

Monfort originally sought BCI's help in protecting her family-owned Monfort Bat Cave, home to the world's largest-known colony of Geoffroy's rousette fruit bats (*Rousettus amplexicaudatus*). The cave on Samal Island is a sanctuary for about 1.8 million of the bats, which had all but disappeared from other caves in the region. Monfort not only protected the cave, but turned it into a vital venue for teaching visitors about the benefits of bats in the Philippines. She has hosted many bat-education events at the site and helped with others around the area. She launched the nonprofit Philippine Bat Conservation group and works tirelessly to change public attitudes. Bats of the Philippines have a true champion in Norma Monfort.

Scouting for bats

What does a bat biologist do?" "What is bat guano good for?" "What is White-nose Syndrome?" These were among countless questions asked – and answered – by Scouts who visited a bat-education exhibit at the 17th National Boy Scout Jamboree.

Some 45,000 Scouts from around the United States attended last year's Jamboree at Fort A.P. Hill near Fredericksburg, Virginia. The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), recognizing an outstanding educational opportunity, presented a very special exhibit on "Bats and White-nose Syndrome" as part of the event's popular "Conservation Trail."

During the previous year, biologists and educators from DCR and the state Department of Game and Inland Fisheries had been working to combat WNS, which was confirmed in Virginia in 2009. They also developed educational materials to explain the disease.

Since many Scout troops around the country had been asked to stop visiting caves because of WNS, the department decided to teach the Scouts about bats, WNS and the reasoning behind the caving restrictions. The task was given to DCR Education Coordinator Carol Zokaite.

With materials and advice from Bat Conservation International and other partners, Zokaite created three stations for the exhibit, each covering a different aspect of the subject. The stations included colorful educational displays and interactive questions and activities. Posters hung around the exhibit identified bats in different regions so Scouts could discover species in their home area.

Among other activities, the Scouts were shown information about bats' huge consumption of insects, then were asked to answer such questions as: "What do you think will happen if a large number of the bats in the U.S. die from White-nose Syndrome?" Visitors also tried hands-on simulations of field-research techniques and used bat detectors to listen to bats' ultrasonic echolocation calls.

A total of 35 DCR staff members worked the exhibit during the nine days of the Jamboree. They were well versed in the subject matter, Zokaite said, after attending a training workshop on bats and WNS.

She reports that some 13,000 Scouts went through the exhibit and they "asked great questions and were very interested in WNS and the problems it is causing for the bats. They seemed to understand the importance of bats to the environment and the need to protect the bat habitats."

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