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Training in Latin America



Surrounded by the dense rainforests and wading through knee-deep water, the group stretched its mist nets over and along a river in southwestern Nicaragua. Among the bats they hoped to capture in their nets was the greater bulldog bat, one of the few species of fishing bats. And sure enough, several of the large – but remarkably gentle – greater bulldog bats found their way into the nets. The team members identified, examined and discussed the unusual bats, then released them to continue their fishing.

So went the evening for 15 students from five Central American countries who attended an International Bat Research and Conservation Workshop. The six-day session in January 2009 was organized by Bat Conservation International and its partners, especially the U.S. Forest Service International Programs.

Conducted in Spanish, it was adapted in part from BCI's popular U.S. workshops and planned as a pilot project. The goal was to evaluate the potential of such workshops for growing self-sustaining bat-conservation programs in threatened tropical forests of Latin America, where bat biologists are sometimes scarce.

The trial run was an outstanding success, both in the reviews from students and instructors and in the post-workshop conservation work it helped produce. BCI and its partners have since conducted similar workshops in Paraguay and Mexico, with others planned in the near future.

Students from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica were taught at the initial workshop by six experienced instructors: Bernal Rodriguez of Costa Rica; Sybill Amelon and Ted Weller of the U.S. Forest Service; Richard LaVal, a renowned U.S. bat biologist who's now retired but active in Costa Rica; Kimberley Williams-Guillén, a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Michigan; and Christa Weise, Coordinator of BCI's Bats of Latin America & the Caribbean Program.

Participants received a solid background on research methods, conservation and management of bats through lectures. At night, students got practical field experience in assessing habitat, humane bat-capture techniques, identification and acoustic monitoring. Daytime field exercises provided hands-on lessons in the use of a variety of capture equipment and in the intricacies of radiotracking bats tagged with miniature transmitters.

One year after the Nicaragua workshop, the conservation payoff is becoming clear: at least nine participants are undertaking bat projects in their own countries or working with studies on bats.

Cristian Craker is studying bat diversity on landscapes dominated by coffee plantations and working to establish a bat-conservation organization in Guatemala, as Jonathan Delmer is doing in Honduras. Ana Patricia Calderon is conducting research into the disturbance of protected areas, while planning a genetic study of bats in Guatemala. Alban Jiménez is providing community education in natural areas of Guanacaste, Costa Rica, where he recently held a three-day bat workshop for schoolchildren.

These workshops bring together bat specialists from the United States and Latin America as instructors and provide unique learning and networking opportunities that benefit both students and teachers.

They provide “a great opportunity for Central American students and professionals to obtain knowledge that we

couldn't obtain in our own countries,” says Guatemalan student Ana Patricia Calderon. “Without a doubt this is very valuable to us.”

The workshops, conducted entirely in Spanish, are free to participants, except for a small fee to reserve their place. The goal of BCI and its partners is to ensure that this experience is accessible to those with the interest and potential, but who would be unable to receive training because of language barriers or prohibitive costs.

Bringing the right people together and giving them the knowledge and opportunities to find their own strategies can make a huge difference for the conservation of bats and their habitats throughout Latin America.

Your help can make these and other Latin American workshops a reality. Please support this crucial program at: www.batcon.org/donate.

BCI thanks these key partners and colleagues for their help and support of these Latin American Workshops: U.S. Forest Service International Programs, USAID Nicaragua, Paso Pacifico and Comision Nacional de Areas Naturales Protegidas. Also Ted Weller and Sybill Amelon (U.S. Forest Service); Bernal Rodriguez (Universidad de Costa Rica); Kimberly Williams-GuillÃ©n (University of Michigan); Richard LaVal (Bat Jungle, Costa Rica); Rodrigo MedellÃ©n (Universidad Nacional AutÃ³noma de MÃ©xico); Luis Aguirre (Bolivian Bat Conservation Program); Gerardo Carreon (Naturalia A.C.); and Erin Fernandez, Jim Rorabaugh and Scott Richardson (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service).

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