



A pioneering Russian biologist who founded his country's first community-led conservation movement for bats is being recognized with a 2011 Whitley Award – a top conservation honor that carries a prize of \$48,550.

Igor Prokofyev, founder and director of the Grassroots Alliance PERESVET in Western Russia, received one of seven Whitley Awards from the United Kingdom-based Whitley Fund for Nature (WFN).

Prokofyev, WFN notes, is leading unprecedented efforts to conserve Russia's long-ignored bats. Precise information is scarce, but many of Russia's more than 35 bat species are in decline, largely because of deforestation, pollution and habitat loss. PERESVET, based in Bryansk, is a coalition of varied stakeholders dedicated to solving community problems, with special attention to biodiversity.

Prokofyev turned his attention to bats in 2008 when he realized that, despite their importance to the region's ecology and economy, Western Russia had no program for studying or conserving their populations. "Bats are very useful animals because they kill so many insect pests," he said. "This is crucial for agriculture and very important for local farmers"

Among other activities, Prokofyev is Coordinator of iBats Russia, the country's first large-scale monitoring program for bats. Developed as a citizen-science program by the United Kingdom's Bat Conservation Trust and The Zoological Society of London, the model is spreading around the world.

Working with local volunteers, the PERESVET project is using bat detectors (which collect bat echolocation calls) to record and identify the different species found around the community. With strong interest in the initial acoustic surveys, Prokofyev is now expanding the program throughout Western Russia with a network of volunteers. The effort is building a real commitment to conservation among the volunteers, while the data will be used to develop recommendations for future bat-conservation guidelines.

Expanding the program also includes creation of Bat Conservation Russia, the nation's first nonprofit focused on bats. An alliance of scientists, community groups and other non-government organizations, it is designed to strengthen cooperation for bat conservation throughout Russia.

Wide-ranging education and outreach are producing noticeable changes in attitudes about bats, as schools form "Bat Friends Clubs" and at least one village has successfully opposed forest clearing that would have destroyed important bat habitat.

The Whitley Awards honor "some of the world's most dynamic grassroots conservation leaders" and support projects that "have long-lasting impacts and aim to fully include local communities in wildlife and habitat conservation." Princess Anne presented the awards in London.

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