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Bat Houses for Katmandu

Bat conservation is a fairly new concept in Nepal. Yet a small but dedicated corps of homegrown conservationists is spreading the word through innovative community outreach projects, often with support from BCI's Global Grassroots Conservation Fund grants. Among this group are Sanjan Thapa and his colleagues at Nepal's Small Mammals Conservation and Research Foundation, who introduced the first bat houses in the country.



A bat conservation poster from Nepal. Courtesy of Sanjan Thapa

Thapa and his team are using their bat houses, built from BCI plans, both as potential roosts for displaced bats and as the centerpiece of a bat-education and community mobilization tool. Thapa says many of Nepal's 51 confirmed bat species are losing habitat to rapid changes in land use, especially urbanization. Meanwhile, most people know very little about the ecological importance of bats and harbor very negative attitudes about them.

The team installed what apparently is the country's first bat house at the Central Zoo in Katmandu in 2009 to increase awareness among zoo visitors. That proved successful enough that Thapa requested and received a Global Grassroots grant to build and install 15 bat houses in and around the Katmandu Valley. The idea, he said, was to convince local residents of the value of adopting and monitoring the bat houses “ with the ultimate goal of building a long-term commitment to bat conservation.

Winning approval of local officials and landowners to install the bat houses proved time-consuming and challenging, but they were ultimately successful. The four-chamber nursery houses were installed on 15-foot bamboo poles or attached to sides of structures, including schools and government buildings.

They were located in both urban and rural settings throughout the valley and in three sites beyond it. The installations by team members and volunteers typically drew curious neighbors, who received a quick introduction to bats and bat houses.

Thapa and his colleagues coupled the installations with an intensive awareness campaign about the benefits of bats. They produced and distributed colorful posters and other materials and gave presentations to schoolchildren, college students, government officials and an assortment of community groups.

The outreach generally produced at least initial commitments to monitor the bat houses, and Thapa plans to monitor them at least once every six months in the future. He's still waiting to see when bats will discover the bat houses and move in, but the educational value of what residents must consider very curious structures has been proven.

"This," says Thapa, "is a new approach and an example of rare attempts at bat conservation in Nepal."

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