

Of bats and men: Saving the sheath-tailed bat

Angela Street

16-March-2015



Jean-Claude and Nigel conducting the surveys

For decades, conservationists the world over have been haunted by a single, burning question: Will the rest of humanity care enough about the other species with whom we share this planet to try to save them? The response, to date, has been lukewarm at best, and in actual practice, is edging towards a resounding 'no'.

While it is clear that many people do feel passionately about wildlife and wild places, and occasionally even the authorities and other powerful players are stirred to action, it is equally clear that the battle for nature is rapidly being lost, day by day. We, who so value our own kind, who fear death above all and are straining the Earth's carrying capacity in our bid for immortality, can we not spare more than a passing thought for our fellow travellers?

What does a tiny bat have to do with me and my family, you ask? In a word, everything. Whether we invoke an empathic kind of caring filtered through the lens of idealism or the self-interested caring proffered by hard-headed realists, it all boils down to one unassailable truth: remove enough strands from the web of life and eventually the web collapses. Saving the bat is to save ourselves, if indeed we merit saving.

Recently, ICS Silhouette rangers Jean-Claude Camille and Nigel Boniface took a break from biological field work to conduct social research on Silhouette and Mahé (the only two places in the world where the bats are found), interviewing a grand total of 200 people across eight districts about the imperiled 'sousouri bannan' (sheath-

tailed bat). Given that a certain degree of public support is the sine qua non for protecting endangered species, these surveys fulfilled two critical functions; namely, (a) they provided us with an index of public awareness and opinion, and (b) in and of themselves, they were a way to inform people of the bat's plight.

The survey results are encouraging, especially when compared against the results of identical surveys conducted by ICS in 2013. Public awareness appears to have improved greatly over the span of a year, with an impressive 96% of survey respondents either visually recognising the bat or recognising it by name, in contrast to only 72% of survey respondents in 2013. People had a very good sense of the species' precarious situation, with 77% of respondents estimating the population at 100 or fewer individuals (it is documented at around 60 individuals), compared to 57% of respondents in 2013.

A few people eagerly alerted us about possible new roosting sites on both islands, which will be investigated in 2015. Finally, a strong conservation ethic emerged: the vast majority of respondents -- a whopping 94% -- described the bat as "very important" to the nation (as opposed to quite important or not important), in contrast to only 63% of last year's respondents.

Preservation of biodiversity ranks highly in people's minds -- the public clearly values Seychelles' native fauna -- but still the question remains: when push comes to shove, what are we prepared to do to save this species? Uncertainty as to the exact reason(s) for the bats' decline clouds the picture, but it is difficult to imagine that we do not play a part in this; indeed, each and every one of the suspected causes and on-going threats is directly related to human activity. While it is important to acknowledge that some of these impacts are globally induced, leadership on local conservation issues must be derived locally -- in this sense, the fate of the Seychelles sheath-tailed bat lies in the hands of the people of Seychelles, whose enlightened, pro-conservation attitudes are a reason for hope.

By Angela Street
Island Conservation Society (ICS)