

Pagoda Bats of Vietnam

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The Ma Toc Pagoda of Vietnam was built almost 450 years ago in the Mekong Delta of southern Vietnam. It's also called the Bat Pagoda because thousands of flying foxes roost in the trees of its scenic grounds. But high school teacher Ly Quoc Dang worries that "the number of bats decreases day after day because the hunters greatly outnumber the monks." He asked Bat Conservation International to help him do something about it.

Although a few local people try to guard the ancient Khmer pagoda in Soc Trang Province, he said, "the confrontation between conservationists and bat hunters goes on, and more and more bats seem to end up on restaurant tables." The only solution, he decided, is to educate the people, beginning with children, to benefits of the bats in their midst.

With a BCI Global Grassroots Conservation Fund grant, Ly designed and conducted a pilot program to teach area children about bats and their importance to the environment. Ultimately, he hopes to generate enough local enthusiasm to have the pagoda declared a protected Natural Reserve.

He developed games built around ecological associations, especially those involving bats, quizzes and artwork and introduced them at three elementary and middle schools. The games taught children about the connections between plants and the pagoda's Lyle's and large flying foxes. The bats spend their days roosting in the pagoda's trees, then leave each night to feed on fruit. They scatter the seeds so new trees will grow and the forests will remain healthy. Other bats eat troublesome insects or pollinate plants.

In one game, bats' benefits were described, along with the threats bats face. Then students suggested and discussed possible solutions. They drew pictures of the plants and animals to demonstrate how bats fit into the environment. In a pollination game, students were rewarded with fruit they after scattered a bit for flour (to represent pollen) on a basket of flowers.

The children demonstrated an increased awareness of bats and their benefits for their community and, Ly says, they took that information home to share with their parents and siblings. He hopes to expand his educational efforts in the future.

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BCI's Global Grassroots Conservation Fund supports critical conservation efforts around the world. Help us sow the seeds of bat conservation. Support Global Grassroots at www.batcon.org.