



MAURITIAN WILDLIFE FOUNDATION

MWF evidence does not support a cull of the Mauritius Fruit Bat

The Government of Mauritius has announced a plan to cull Mauritius Fruit Bats on 06 October 2015. The Mauritian Wildlife Foundation has been opposed to a culling of fruit bats for over a decade, insisting that scientific evidence must support this decision.

The evidence from a study carried out in the last fruiting season (supported by SOS Save Our Species Fund <http://www.sospecies.org/> and the University of Bristol by Dr Ryszard Oleksy, post-doc student and MWF volunteer), shows that the impact of the fruit bats on damage to fruits is not as severe as claimed in the press and by the public. Preliminary results indicate that it is around 11%. Furthermore, the study indicates that exotic birds and rats, as well as natural fruit drop and unharvested fruits, account for a greater proportion of the damage than fruit bats. We are continuing this study for the coming fruiting season.

The same study has put tracking tags on wild bats and this shows that bats are flying from one end of Mauritius to the other in one night and can roost in different places each night (it was believed previously that they would return to the same roost each night). This introduces significant errors in attempts to count bats especially if the count is not done all at once all over the island, which it has not been. We believe that the numbers of bats that are being quoted, around 90 000 individuals, will have been over counted. There is little evidence of the numbers of bats increasing in recent years. A few months ago 100's of bats were found dead in the Black River Gorges, and veterinary tests carried out internationally have confirmed that the bats died of starvation, supporting our conclusion that the population is at holding capacity for the small and declining habitat left on Mauritius.

We believe that a decision to cull should be based on scientific evidence. Currently the evidence we have does not support a cull. It does however support extremely strongly the promotion of the pruning of trees and using nets to exclude both bats and birds.

There are also concerns regarding animal welfare issues of a cull where animals which are shot could be wounded and die many days later. Additionally control between September and January, will coincide with the breeding season and females may be carrying dependent young when shot, orphaning the babies.

We are extremely concerned that a decision to cull will damage the good reputation in conservation that Mauritius has acquired internationally. Mauritius also needs to uphold its international commitments to treaties and conventions it has signed (e.g. Convention on Biological Diversity).

A cull of bats disregards the contribution of bats to ecosystems services such as pollination and fruit dispersal. The maintenance of plants and forests on Mauritius may rely heavily on fruit bats, since they are the last large plant pollinator and disperser on Mauritius. The distance they can travel, and thus disperse fruits and seeds, is unrivalled by any other animal. We also have not got enough information on the effect of cyclones and droughts on bat numbers. A cull cannot be justified in the absence of basic knowledge of population biology.

We believe the impact of bats on fruit crops is exaggerated. Our study indicates there are trees which are not harvested fully, both in back yards and in orchards. A greater yield will be obtained if the industry promoted the harvesting of all fruits, especially at the correct stage of maturity. This will reduce the attraction of fruiting trees to bats which we believe prefer ripe fruit. We understand that some orchard owners don't harvest all the fruit due to the high cost of labour, and back yard owners due to the problem of accessing fruits on tall trees (which would be resolved with a pruned tree). A suggestion to owners who don't wish to harvest their ripe fruit is to facilitate open access to the public to pick fruit (along the lines of the UK model of 'pick your own') which could be a popular initiative reducing the price of fruit to the public and bringing additional revenue to the fruit grower.

A second study on the attitude of Mauritians towards fruit bats (conducted by Ms Malikah Wachill, MSc student), based on a representative sample of 560 Mauritians has shown that the attitudes of over 90% of Mauritians ranged from neutral to strongly positive towards bats. In addition, the great majority of respondents (>80%) had neutral or negative views concerning animal hunting. Socio-demographic factors such as gender, location, ethnicity or religion had little to no influences on attitudes towards bats. The results suggest a positive shift in attitudes of the youngest generations (especially adults between 18-25 years) compared to their older counterparts. In addition, with increasing education and income levels people tended to show more positive attitudes and behaviors towards bats.

The Mauritian Wildlife Foundation concludes that bats should not be culled for the reasons mentioned above. We strongly encourage a scheme to subsidize nets, train farmers in pruning of trees and installation of netting, and to support Mauritians to prune their trees.

7th October 2015

