

Media workshop

24th October 2019,
Media Trust, Port-Louis, Mauritius



Report and Recommendations

Compiled by:

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Background

The Mauritius Fruit Bat *Pteropus niger* is an endemic, endangered species which causes damage to lychee, mango and longan fruit harvests in orchards as well as mature garden trees across the island. It is also perceived as a messy and noisy animal when feeding on fruit trees by many members of the public. In the face of increasing public pressure and concern from orchard owners over the loss of their fruit crop, three culls of the species were implemented in 2015, 2016 and 2018¹. This caused major concern among international conservation organisations seeking to protect the bat species². However, effective and realistic solutions to the problem remain difficult to find.

Following the 2016 bat cull, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), acknowledging the difficulty of this situation, offered support to the Mauritian Government through provision of advice from its expert network, in particular its Task Force on Human-Wildlife Conflict and its Bat Specialist Group. In early 2017, representatives of the IUCN SSC Human-Wildlife Conflict Task Force and Chester Zoo (UK) visited Mauritius to discuss this issue with the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation, FAREI, and also the National Parks and Conservation Service (NPCS). During this visit, the issue was discussed in great detail with many stakeholders from fruit exporters, small-scale farmers, large orchard owners and members of the general public, to hear their views, ideas and concerns. It was agreed that a workshop was to be held in Mauritius before the next lychee harvest, to bring together representatives from the range of stakeholders, including fruit growers and traders, netting importers and distributors, researchers, and government extension officers. A first workshop was held on Mauritius in August 2017 ('Netting Workshop'³), followed by a 'Research Workshop'⁴ in May 2018 and in October 2019 by two other workshops, the 'Backyard Grower's Workshop'⁵ ([Backyard Fruit Grower's Report](#)) and the 'Media Workshop' (below).

The media are one stakeholder that has not been part of this process before so engaging them and including them in discussions to hear their perspectives and recommendations was important. The media was recognised as a key stakeholder group requiring a specific platform for discussion, and a key group in the human-wildlife conflict resolution.

¹ There were no official culls in 2017, but at the time of writing this report, a fourth cull was being implemented, and was said to extend into 2020.

² Over a dozen international organisations, including International Union for Conservation of Nature, Bat Conservation International, World Wildlife Fund, BirdLife International, World Association of Zoos and Aquaria, Conservation International, African Wildlife Foundation, Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, Chester Zoo, Lube Foundation, Australasian Bat Society, Institute of Zoology --

³ <https://www.mauritian-wildlife.org/mwf-files/files/accounts/Netting%20Workshop%20Report%20Aug%202017.pdf>

⁴ <https://adobe.ly/2YY6OBF>

They play an interesting and dual role in society, both in terms of their ability to shape and influence the content and tone of political discourse, but also because their reporting reflects many of the attitudes held by a society. The media in Mauritius often report on issues relating to the growing of fruit, the fruit bat culls and wider conservation issues and their role in both shaping and reflecting this discourse makes them valuable stakeholders in the wider process. This was the first and a successful attempt at engaging with the media directly. The response of all the journalists present was very good as they spoke about issues they faced while reporting on bat conflict. They also agreed on the fact that they lacked information and needed it to better report on this issue.

This report summarises the ‘Media Workshop’ and its conclusions and sets out recommendations towards a long-term and sustainable strategy for reducing human-fruit bat conflict on Mauritius, by working closely with the media.

Participants

The meeting was held at the Media Trust, Port Louis, Mauritius where workshop facilities were available. 19 participants attended the workshop including journalists, a student in journalism, Mr Vimul Nundloul from the National Parks and Conservation Service, and Mauritian Wildlife Foundation staff. In addition to the Mauritian participants, Dr Simon Tollington (Conservation Scientist, Chester Zoo, UK) and Dr Ewan MacDonald⁶ (University of Oxford and Chester Zoo, UK) attended the workshop. Also present was Mr Virat Singh⁷, an Indian journalist and member of the IUCN SSC Task Force on Human Wildlife Conflict who has extensive expertise in wildlife and environmental reporting (Appendix I). The workshop was organised by the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation, and received support from the staff of the Media Trust.

Workshop Summary

The half-day programme on 24th October 2019 consisted of presentations by participants and discussions to develop ideas and recommendations in detail.

Presentations:

Mr Chayman Soorajbali (Chairman, Media Trust) opened the workshop with a welcome to all participants.

⁵ <https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/about-us/people/ewan-macdonald>

⁶ (<http://www.hwctf.org/members/virat-a-singh>)



Mr Chayman Surajbali, Chairman of the Media Trust, welcoming participants to the workshop.

Dr Vikash Tatayah (Conservation Director, MWF) invited all participants in the room to briefly introduce themselves and gave a presentation to ‘set the scene’ of the workshop (Mauritius Fruit Bat biology, conflict with humans, conflict resolution workshops held so far etc.).

Dr Simon Tollington, (Chester Zoo, UK), gave a presentation on the recent studies of fruit bats and progress to date in Mauritius. He explained the studies on the impact of the Endangered Mauritian Flying fox on commercial fruit farms and the efficiency of mitigation measures (pruning, netting)⁸. He then talked about the studies he had designed to quantify the damage caused by fruit bats to backyard lychee trees in Mauritius and evaluating the benefits of protective netting⁹.

Dr Ewan MacDonald, (Chester Zoo Conservation Fellow, Saïd Business School, Oxford (UK)), gave a presentation on the representation of bats worldwide and importance of bats in the ecosystem and to some industries.

⁷ Oleksy R Z, Ayady C L, Tatayah V, Jones C, Froidevaux J S P, Racey P A & Jones G (2018). The impact of the Mauritian flying fox *Pteropus niger* on commercial fruit farms and the efficacy of mitigation. *Oryx*. doi:10.1017/S0030605318001138.

⁸ Tollington S, Kareemun Z, Augustin A, Lallchand K, Tatayah V & Zimmermann A (2019). Quantifying the damage caused by fruit bats to backyard lychee trees in Mauritius and evaluating the benefits of protective netting. *Plos One*. PONE-D-19-09000R2

For example, in Thailand bats help to pollinate flowers of Durian, a fruit of high economic importance. Other bats also control insect pests in Indonesia shade cacao plantations, thereby significantly improving yields and revenues. The media plays a central role in informing the public about what happens in the world, particularly in those areas in which audiences do not possess direct knowledge or experience. Media can portray a sensationalist and incorrect view about bats, some examples were provided from UK and Mauritius. How can media improve the perception of bats by providing accurate information?

Mr Virat. A. Singh, (IUCN Human Wildlife Conflict Task Force; Indian journalist), presented case studies from Mumbai's Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP) as well as Aarey Forest, about the leopards and how media had contributed to share facts that have helped to change the perception of humans towards the animals.

He also explained about a multi-stakeholder project named 'Mumbaikars for SGNP' running since 2011 by forest department also involved Media as a key stakeholder. Under this project regular interactions with journalists writing on wildlife through workshops were held that equipped them with scientific knowledge as well as better understanding of how to report scientific data about leopards. He also emphasised on the need for authentic information being made available to the media during a crisis or conflict situation.

A WhatsApp group was also created to obtain information as well as send important communication to all those in the group.

Panel Session



A panel session was organised, where members of the media could ask questions to the panellists. The panellists were from left to right: Dr Ewan Macdonald, Dr Vikash Tatayah (who chaired the session), Mr Virat Singh, Dr Simon Tollington and Mr Vimul Nundlall (Scientific Officer, National Parks and Conservation Service).

Question: How is the Bat counting done?

Response: The National Parks and Conservation Service has been counting bats with the collaboration with other organisations such as the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation and Forestry Service who provide staff for the count. This year, NPCS has recruited students from the University of Mauritius.

The method now used is 'Evening Dispersal Count'. This is counting the bats in the evening when they are leaving their day-time roosting sites found around the island. The time period for the full count is around two weeks. The last full count was done in 2017.

Question: Besides netting, is there any other method to protect the fruit tree during the fruiting season?

Response: The netting of trees is recognised worldwide as the best method to reduce damage but the net must be correctly placed on the tree, lifted from the branches and sealed at the base¹⁰. Pruning of a tree by itself (or in combination with netting) is also another option that can protect the fruits from damage. To prevent rats from accessing the tree the trunk of the tree can be painted with glue and ensure branches don't touch the ground. Some other methods are being researched in Mauritius but results are not yet available. These include Bat repellents and using ultra sound. Electrification of the tree has been used but it is not bat friendly. LED lamps are not effective as the bats become accustomed to them. Fire crackers are not environment-friendly (noise, smoke, etc), or friendly to neighbours and can represent a fire hazard. All other methods have their costs associated with them.

Question: Netting is very costly, is there a way to help with this?

Response: FAREI provides subsidies on the net and one can also pay private netters to put up the net for around Rs 1500 per tree. The amount invested to protect the fruit tree will be largely recouped when the fruits are sold and should be compared to the costs of other protection methods.

Question: How can we protect both the bat and the fruit?

Response: Communication, collaboration and compromise. There is no definite answer. We have to recognise that media play an important role in the matter. No single solution but a holistic way may be found in the restoration of forests, and to value the fauna and flora of Mauritius.

Question: How do we change the perception of people on the Mauritius Fruit Bat?

Response: To report on the Mauritius Fruit Bat in a positive manner. Try to find what is the cause of the issue, based on real facts. Try to make people value the species. Motivate people to buy nets for their trees. Present an area where the method has worked, like a demonstration site.

Question: Is it true that Bombay duck repels bats?

Response: May be possible, but as with all mitigation methods, more research is needed to confirm the efficiency of the methods.

Question: How many backyards growers came to the workshop on 23rd October 2019?

Response: There were around 7 backyard grower and 5 commercial grower attendees, but more workshops with a larger audience of backyard growers need to be organized in future.

⁹ <https://www.mauritian-wildlife.org/mwf-files/files/accounts/Netting%20Brochure%202019.pdf>

Question: How to relate the scenario in Mumbai about the leopards and the Mauritius Fruit Bat?

Response: Journalists should not take sides, just report on the situation. Give facts. Tell what happens on the ground. To follow up on whatever is needed.

Question: How can science influence the policy?

Response: Ideally the evidence presented by scientific studies should be an important part of decision making but often Government bodies are influenced by public perception which may not be based on facts. They are in a difficult position since they have to decide based upon what information is available to them. The Media are an important element in educating in this situation. So, the Media need to be in possession of the correct information.

Question: What difficulties does the media face about the Mauritius Fruit Bat situation?

Response: Lack of awareness. Need a lot of training about the subject. If looking for information or facts from government bodies, that takes a lot of time. Even if a WhatsApp group was created, government officials are unlikely to be able to participate in it. No proper channels exist to look for information.

Media Workshop Recommendations

Problem

There is a lack of awareness for both the public and journalists. Access to information is difficult. MWF is the usual source of information for the media.

Solutions

Factsheets

Create a factsheet of commonly asked questions with answers which are accessible for information.

List of Contact persons and organisations

Create a list of contacts if more detail is needed. This can be specialist individuals or organizations for specific subject areas.

WhatsApp Group

Create a WhatsApp group which can give current information (to save repeating it) or to respond quickly to questions.

Government Spokesperson

For the Ministry to have an authorised Senior Government officer (e.g. the Director of the National Parks and Conservation Service) to provide information on the WhatsApp group.

Workshops

Organise workshops or site visits for journalists on specific subjects so the issues are better understood. Student journalists can also be invited. Media Trust stated that they are happy to organize events for journalists.

Acknowledgement:

This workshop would not have been possible without the keen participation of all attendees, especially journalists. We are also grateful for funding received from Chester Zoo (UK), and assistance from the IUCN Human Wildlife Conflict Task Force, and last but not least, the Media Trust (in particular, Mr Surajbali and Mr Cathapermall).

APPENDICES

Profile: Virat A Singh

Virat works as a Special Correspondent, with a Mumbai based national newspaper-Daily News and Analysis (DNA) and reports on wildlife and environment.

Skilled in media and communications, he has a keen interest in wildlife conservation as well as human-wildlife interactions and is also a Member of the IUCN, SSC Human-Wildlife Conflict Task Force (hwctf).

He has been traveling as a resource person for workshops organized by well-known wildlife organizations and State Forest departments, to different cities across India for over five years now. These workshops for media-persons as well as forest department staff are specifically designed to highlight the role of media in wildlife conservation and the need for sensitive reporting on the human-animal conflict.

He is an active member with 'Mumbaikars for SGNP' (MfSGNP) - a Maharashtra State Forest Department project right from its inception in 2011, which brings together and engages all the important stakeholders to address the human-leopard conflict in Mumbai. Apart from this, he is also a member of a group that is working to sensitize Mass media/Journalism students towards wildlife through a program initiated in 2018 called- 'Leopard in a SPOT: Role of Media in Wildlife Reportage'

Alongside working as a Journalist since 2005, Virat is a visiting faculty with Mumbai based media schools and also works closely with Mumbai based wildlife organizations, NGO's, citizen groups for strengthening their outreach and public engagement activities.

A Bachelor's degree in Science (Zoology) from Mumbai University and a Diploma in Journalism and Mass Communication from Mumbai, Virat strongly believes in writing new stories that spread awareness, sensitizes stakeholders and creates a positive impact.

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