

Project Rufus

Endemic to Madagascar, *Pteropus rufus* is an ecologically important pollinator and seed disperser amid highly fragmented landscapes, such as the SLLF. Declines of up to 40% during the last 20 years has highlighted the species as a major conservation priority. The Sainte Luce Forest Fragment 6 ('S6'), an unprotected patch of forest designated as a community resource area, contains a *P. rufus* roost. Currently, this colony of *P. rufus* is under intense pressure due to human disturbance and habitat loss¹, placing the species under immediate threat in the region.

SEED's *P. rufus* conservation work started with Phase I in 2016, developing a locally enforced protected area ('exclusion zone'). With the endorsement of local organisations, a ban on hunting and logging was enforced, limiting the threats to the population. SCRIP staff and volunteers also conducted environmental education sessions in the two schools in Sainte Luce and conducted mass mobilisation events across the community.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic increased pressure on already limited forest resources for the nearby communities, as food prices rose, and income opportunities disappeared. Illegal logging approximately 10 meters from the *P. rufus* roost was recorded in mid-October 2020. As a result, the bats temporarily left the roost and moved outside of the protected exclusion zone.

In response to this news, an Enforcement Committee has been established to strengthen the implementation of the local law and reduce the likelihood of further illegal activities occurring. The local law still requires ratification by the relevant regional officials to further substantiate enforcement and prosecution at a regional level but work towards this is ongoing. Regular site visits to the protected bat roost with members of the Enforcement Committee helped to familiarise them with the area that they will be responsible for patrolling and protecting.

Following the establishment of the Enforcement Committee, project staff facilitated discussions around the consequences for illegal behaviours within the exclusion zone. This process was agreed with key community stakeholders, and so far, there have been no records of illegal activities within the exclusion zone. Additionally, recent bat counts carried out by the SEED research team have shown the bat colony appears to have returned to the exclusion zone in S6 for breeding season; at the last count, approximately 700 individuals were counted.

The increase in bat numbers in S6 and the lack of perpetrators are positive signs that SEED's efforts are working. However, it is important to continue to monitor the roost, to ensure numbers are maintained and the protection continues. Additionally, SEED aims to continue research into the bat's usage of S6 and nearby fragment S7, as the latter area is unprotected.

With additional funding, SEED would be able to continue the ongoing monitoring of the situation, with further bat counts, forest patrols and community engagement.

¹ Roberts, S.H. et al. (2016). Madagascar Conservation & Development 11(1), 23-32.