

Kendra Phelps, Biological Sciences Ph.D. Candidate

Research Interest—Bats

I'm interested in the impacts of cave disturbance by humans on the bat communities that are dependent upon those caves. So for the last two years, I've been researching and quantifying the levels of disturbance at a range of caves across the Bohol Island in Central Philippines. And so from this, I am able to compare what bat species are found in the caves as well as the health status of those bats and see if that varies with increasing levels of disturbance, which is what we would expect to see.

What is conservation biology?

Conservation biology focuses on how humans and wildlife interact in the environment together, and particularly, trying to remediate or minimize impacts or conflicts between humans and wildlife species.

Tell us about your Fulbright experience.

My Fulbright experience was wonderful. You know, it's a great opportunity to live amongst and learn about a new culture and then they're always there to help support you. And they introduce you to other Americans that are also in the Fulbright. So you become a close-knit family of Americans in a foreign country.

Using research opportunities to help educate

We drew a lot of attention. Here's a group of people who aren't from this small little village, especially a foreigner, a girl foreigner, like, 'what does she want with the cave?' And so a lot of people joined us and that's also an indirect way of educating. So then while we were doing that, we got to talk to them about, 'well this guy eats lots of mosquitoes,' or 'he eats the pests that destroy your rice crops,' or 'oh this big fruit bat is pollinating durian,' and 'do you like durian?' So we kind of used what we were doing, while we were there. And the attention we drew we kind of turned it around and used it as a way to educate people.

What happens next?

We are working with the government. We have developed close government relationships. And they are actually using the data from my project to provide protection for some of the more disturbed caves, or more priority caves there. That, and then also I documented a large number of cave locations for future research projects. So there's a lot of, any Ph.D. student or any graduate student would tell you, what they got from their project was more questions. So you always graduate knowing that there are still things you wanted to look at that you didn't get to because you needed to graduate. So now it's later-life opportunities and maybe this will become a long-term research area for me in Southeast Asia.