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## How much is a bat worth? - Bats in the News



Millions of Mexican free-tailed bats live in caves and under bridges in the farm country west of San Antonio, Texas. Some farmers realize the bats are valuable allies because they are voracious consumers of flying insects “including many devastating agricultural pests. Now, reports the Houston Chronicle, teams of scientists are working around southwest Texas to figure out just how much those bats are worth to farmers.

“Ultimately, we want to put a dollar value on the bat,” BCI Science Advisor Thomas Kunz told Chronicle reporter Dina Cappiello. Kunz, director of Boston University’s Center for Ecology and Conservation Biology, is one of the principal investigators in the \$2.4 million, five-year study, which is being financed by a National Science Foundation grant.

Documenting the dollar value of these migratory mammals, the newspaper said, should benefit bat conservation. “Let’s face it,” Cappiello wrote, “compared with the cuddly panda, the night-flying, insect-loving, eerie-sounding bat is a hard sell when it comes to garnering conservation dollars.”

BCI Founder Merlin Tuttle was also quoted: “If you are trying to conserve something because it is important, you have to show people why it is important.”

The region being studied is called Winter Garden because it grows nearly half the winter vegetables produced in Texas. “In Texas, bats are the front line in reducing adult moths coming from Mexico,” said project co-investigator Patricia Morton of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

The scientists are using thermal-imaging technology to more accurately count bats as they emerge from caves, the Chronicle reports, and they’ve mounted cameras and microphones amid farm crops to determine bats’ locations and movements. Adult moths are being collected to determine population peaks, and researchers are using DNA analysis on insect parts found in bat feces to identify what bats are eating.

That’s only the beginning of this study, and answers likely will be a few years in coming. The Chronicle says that definitive answers “could turn more people on to bat conservation [and would go] a long way to correcting misconceptions about bats.”

But until then, experts uniformly agree with Tuttle, who said: “These bats make a very big difference in the health and economy of Texas.”

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