



When the star-studded cast and crew showed up in Bulgaria to film the Hollywood action movie "The Expendables 2," proud politicians and media came out in force to welcome the production. Unfortunately, by the time they left, an inspection revealed a "heavy toll" on the bats of Devetashka Cave, one of the most important bat-hibernation sites in Europe, Bulgaria's English-language Sofia News Agency reports.

The cave is "a natural landmark of national and international importance and a home to 13 protected bat species, two of them considered globally endangered," says reporter Irina Samokovska. "The permission to shoot (in the cave) was granted despite the fact that domestic legislation only allows for activities related to tourism or scientific research to take place at the site."

The filming involved considerable construction work, brush-clearing and other activity within the cave while the bats were hibernating. Whenever bats are awakened from hibernation, they are forced to burn the energy-rich fat that they need to survive until spring, when insect prey returns and they emerge from hibernation. If they are disturbed too often, they face death by starvation or exhaustion, the news agency said.

And, it reported, "the disturbed bats might not be able to re-hibernate because their home was turned into a noisy tourist attraction after 'The Expendables 2' rebuilt a bridge leading to the Devetashka Cave and left it as a 'gift' for the country."

Zoologist Nikolay Simov of the Center for Bat Studies and Protection at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences told the Sofia News Agency that after the filming ended, he found only about 8,000 bats in Devetashka Cave, while last year there were 30,000.

"We are extremely disappointed in both the Hollywood production company and Bulgaria's regulatory agencies for the needless damage to the bats at Devetashka Cave, the third-largest hibernation site in Europe," Bat Conservation International Executive Director Nina Fascione said in response to this and other reports of the impact of the filming.

"Such activity is inexcusable in a cave where bats are hibernating and significant mortality is virtually inevitable. We call on the Bulgarian government to fulfill its legal and moral obligations to the country's wildlife. And we urge the movie's producers and stars to support "financially" local environmentalists' efforts to restore and protect the cave and to help these battered bats recover from the damage."

The news agency said that the European Commission and several environmental organizations filed inquiries as to why the situation had been allowed to unfold, and that Simov alleged that the film's activities violated the Agreement on the Conservation of Populations of European Bats.

"The irony of it all," concluded Samokovska, "is that this is happening in 2011-12, The Year of the Bat."

The movie features Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, Chuck Norris and other top stars. It is being released by Lions Gate Entertainment.

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