


## VOLUME 24, NO. 4 Winter 2006

### Entertaining Education

A small bat swoops down on a cactus flower, hovers for an instant, dips its long nose deep into the blossom and shoots out its tongue to collect a sip of the artificial nectar puddled inside. This mealtime activity by the Mexican long-nosed bat delights the children and adults watching through the glass window barely four feet (1.2 meters) away.



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The bat (*Leptonycteris nivalis*) is real, but the desert is a flight cage, the cactus and its flowers are sculpted of metal, and the nectar drips through hidden plastic tubing. This is the premier bat exhibit in Mexico – and perhaps the most realistic yet created anywhere. It is the latest addition to the Bioparque Estrella, a popular entertainment and environmental-education center outside Monterrey, Mexico.

This rare opportunity to see nectar-feeding bats going about their invaluable business of pollinating flowers was developed by Bioparque Estrella owner Virgilio Garza in close consultation with BCI Founder Merlin Tuttle and in partnership with BCI Trustee Eugenio Clariond.

Garza's interest in bats was piqued by a BCI conservation book, *Cave Bats of Northern Mexico*. He approached Tuttle in 2005 and subsequently visited BCI for assistance and advice. BCI Science Officer Barbara French devised nectar-feeders for the metal cactus and twice visited the exhibit during construction to help ensure its safety for some two dozen bats.

The Bioparque, spread over 740 acres (300 hectares), features an African animal park with wildlife in natural settings, a cactus garden and nursery and other attractions. It draws some 400,000 visitors annually.

The collaboration between Garza and Clariond also produced a major bat-conservation achievement for the region, as they teamed to acquire and protect Cueva la Boca, a cave that shelters the area's most spectacular bat colony. They are jointly developing an educational program at the cave.

At Bioparque Estrella, visitors enter the bat exhibit through an auditorium where an educational video explains bat values and conservation needs, with the help of a very entertaining animated bat. Then comes a walk through a simulated cave, where (artificial) bats and other creatures are seen in natural surroundings. Peepholes reveal photos of Mexican bats.

But the live bats are the big attraction. Within two months of its opening in August 2006, some 30,000 people had visited the exhibit. Few had ever seen bats up close or appreciated their importance to the environment and human economies. Bioparque Estrella is changing that.

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