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Bats: The Fight for Flight
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Symbols of evil, darkness and black magic. Wraithlike inhabitants of haunted houses. Rabid creatures ready to infect the nearest human. Blind. Clumsy. Aggressive. These are only a few myths people believe about bats. The truth? Bats are ecologically essential – without them many plants would slide into extinction. Incredibly agile creatures, bats possess echolocation abilities far beyond [today's] cutting-edge technology. The odds of a human being bitten by a bat are lower than the same human being struck by lightning. Bats consume hundreds of tons of bothersome insects worldwide each evening and provide an enriching crop fertilizer. Yet most people will not part with the ancient, hateful myths. Unfortunately, this subconscious revulsion has resulted in the unnecessary deaths of millions of bats. Whether humans deliberately kill these innocent creatures or carelessly disregard bats – the effects are devastating.

In the early 1990s, youths cruelly maligned bats roosting in a cave near Iron Mountain, Michigan. Using homemade flamethrowers, these schoolchildren killed and tortured hundreds, possibly thousands, of helpless hibernating bats. After these actions were discovered, bat biologists returned to the cave and later reported that only half of the original colony's population remained in the cave. This animal cruelty is by no means limited to thoughtless children and teenagers. An adult man boasted of gassing the roof and attic of his house to eliminate a colony of bats that had roosted there. He reported removing 1,500 dead bats in buckets from the house. Other options were available to this American homeowner. Why did he not simply block the bats' entrance one evening after the bats had gone for the night? Why did he not contact a local U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service station for possible live removal?

Arguably the worst bat tragedy is caused by human carelessness. For years, abandoned mines deemed hazardous were barricaded, back-filled, even dynamited shut – entombing whole colonies of bats. This practice still happens today, although not as often as in the past. Bat Conservation International, an organization founded by Merlin D. Tuttle, Ph.D., for the protection of bats, has published general guidelines for mine assessment with respect to bat inhabitation. The state of Nevada is a conservation success story. Home to an estimated 200,000 abandoned mines, Nevada faces a significant task of securing tens of thousands of hazardous abandoned mines. The Nevada Bat Conservation Plan, published in 2002, demands that abandoned mines scheduled for closure and/or destruction must be surveyed by a qualified biologist to determine the presence or absence of a bat colony. Nevada could have become a vast cemetery of bat colonies; instead, hazardous abandoned mines are carefully secured to accommodate their inhabitants.

In the past, mankind has recognized the importance and mistreatment of bats only when the bats have been destroyed nearly to the point of no return. This must change. To save bats from a future of further human cruelty, ignorance and carelessness, we must inform and educate the public of the value of bats. In other words, bats need a PR campaign to change their image. Bat Conservation International has done an exceptional job circulating brochures, books, even a movie to enlighten the public to the plights, commonly held misconceptions, and values of bats. However, without concerned volunteers to make



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presentations at schools or clubs or parks or natural history museums, these materials make a limited impact. Why not hold a publicized annual National Bat Festival?

At such a festival, scientists could discuss recent discoveries or updated field technology. Hands-on classes for children could wipe early fears of Dracula and vampire bats from young minds. Meetings could be held for citizens to discuss and debate possible legislation for the protection of bats. Seminars for teachers could be held to distribute bat curricula and impart teaching tools. Wildlife photographers could learn the intricacies of capturing live bats on film. Students could attend all of these events and perhaps become interested enough to pursue a career in bat biology. And, of course, there must be entertainment and competition at the festival to draw more than just scientists. Photo, art and essay contests could promote further research and education on an individual level. Games, food and music are a given at any festival. Perhaps the festival could be held in a different state each summer, educating Americans across the nation.

A grand festival would accomplish much, but the true change will take place in the minds and hearts of the people of the world. This can only be accomplished through further education about bats. Only when people accept bats as the truly amazing, essential and inoffensive creatures they are will this tragic cruelty stop. When children become fascinated by the flight of a flying fox, when Eagle Scouts secure abandoned mines in a bat-friendly manner, when government representatives shield a local bat population from harm – then the future of bats will be secured. Until then, we must work together to achieve this goal.

Grace Willis, a high-school junior in Las Vegas, Nevada, and a student member of Bat Conservation International, wrote an essay on harmful myths about bats and possible solutions. Her essay won second place in the Humane Education Network's nationwide essay contest for 2006. Grace, now a senior, is still researching and writing about this critical problem in bat conservation and plans to major in Environmental Studies with an emphasis in wildlife biology at Wheaton College in Chicago. She writes from the heart with a refreshing vitality. Here is her winning essay (shortened slightly and without footnotes):

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