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More Damaging Anti-Bat Prejudice

An article captioned, "100 Chicagoans Treated In Rabies Outbreak," appeared in many United States newspapers on February 17, 1983. An Illinois public health veterinarian was quoted as saying that "one cause of the outbreak might be infected bats." A much less conspicuous news release on April 21, 1983 was titled "Illinois Rabies Report Was In Error." The disease had been erroneously diagnosed in household pets due to "faulty laboratory work." Blame was ascribed to bats, despite a total lack of evidence to suggest that they were even present!

An even more damaging case of irresponsible news reporting involving bats was aired on CBS Morning News and was published in many newspapers across the United States on January 24, 1984. Headline captions read "Rabid Bats Invade Florida School Gym," and a poorly informed local health official claimed that 20-40% of bats are rabid.

We asked Charles Trimarchi of the New York State Rabies Laboratory to investigate. His findings are typical. A single sick bat was diagnosed as rabid. It did not bite anyone, and there was no evidence that other bats were involved.

A colony of several hundred free-tailed bats had lived in peace in the outer wall spaces of the gym, probably for a long time. Then overreaction to the finding of a single rabid bat led to use of car exhaust, shooting, clubbing and other drastic action that forced the bats out of their normal roosts and into the gym-hardly an invasion! This greatly increased contact between bats and people, only increasing any possible danger.

The unwanted bats could have been excluded by plugging entry holes during their evening emergence to feed. There certainly was no need to panic. Dr. Denny Constantine, the world's foremost authority on rabies in bats, recently made the following statement regarding this kind of situation.

"The public health problems posed by bats are relatively insignificant compared to the public health problems usually initiated by those who publicize bats as problematic, typically resulting in an exaggerated, inappropriate public response, damaging to the public health.

My recent survey work in California indicates that only about one in a thousand bats may be incubating rabies; the infected animal will soon become paralyzed and dies. Rabies infected housebats and most other bats in the United States do not bite people unless handled, and colonies of these bats do not experience outbreaks of rabies; instead, only the occasional animal becomes infested. The lack of savage attacks and lack of outbreaks contrasts with the rabies problem in skunks and foxes, for example. Thus, bat rabies is far less hazardous than anyone would ordinarily expect it to be."

"Overreaction too often consists of deliberate efforts to seek out bats and attempt to destroy them, resulting in scattering disabled bats, sometimes throughout an entire town, increasing some tenfold the numbers of persons and animals bitten as they handle the downed bats."

Hopefully, as more public health officials read our publication, "Bats and Public Health," they will increasingly place their exaggerated fears of bats in perspective and avoid irresponsible solutions to otherwise minor problems. This publication has been distributed to many hundreds of health officials worldwide and is now in its second edition. Responses have been encouraging. For example, one State Vector Control Department recently purchased 150 copies of "Bats and Public Health" for their own distribution.

Complimentary copies are available to all BCI members. Please use this publication and our other materials to refute irresponsible publicity about bats. Newspapers who printed the recent Florida story, for example, should be approached with the facts. We already have contacted CBS Morning News but suggest that our members add their protest (524 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019).

All articles in this issue:

- [Bacardi Joins BCI in Saving Bats](#)
- [Fruit Bat Off the Menu?](#)
- [Reader's Digest Reveals Anti-Bat Bias](#)
- [More Damaging Anti-Bat Prejudice](#)
- [More Ladies Adopt Bats](#)
- [U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Bat Program Completed](#)
- [Bat Program Available](#)
- [Bats in the News](#)
- [Correspondence From Our Members](#)
- [World Conservation Strategy](#)