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Rain Forest Exhibits Offer Visitors a Taste of the Tropics

During the upcoming winter days, Wisconsinites will be able to escape the snow and ice and experience a Costa Rican rain forest. The Milwaukee Public Museum, the fourth largest natural history museum in the U.S., has spent five years creating an impressive 12,000 square foot replica of a rain forest. Complete with sound effects, the exhibit can be viewed both from canopy and forest floor levels. The focus is biological diversity and the interrelatedness of all creatures. Sections include various habitats with resident plants and animals and features bat pollination and seed dispersal.

Bats can be found throughout the exhibit. In one display, the "Food Chain" Tree, visitors enter a dark hollow tree and, in so doing, trigger an electric beam which lights the interior□ filled with bats□ while a recorded tape explains the nutrient cycling taking place as a result of the association between bats and the tree. Merlin Tuttle, the museum's former Curator of Mammals, was a consultant on the project.

Allen Young, Head Curator of the museum's Department of Invertebrate Zoology and Exhibit Director says the exhibit "will play a role in enhancing people's understanding of nature, and the special roles that all creatures play in making Earth a place habitable for the human species."

In Washington, D.C. another exhibit, "Tropical Rain Forests: A Disappearing Treasure" opened early this summer and was inaugurated with a musical presentation, "Yanomamo," featuring the rock star Sting and 200 British school children. They performed songs Sting wrote about rain forests, including one about a bat dispersing the seeds of a fig. The title of the musical refers to the Yanomamo Indian tribe living in the Amazon Basin on the border of Brazil and Venezuela.

The traveling exhibit was organized by the Smithsonian Institution with cooperation from The World Wildlife Fund and is currently on display in the International Gallery located next to the Smithsonian Castle. The exhibit will tour the country through 1992, and the schedule can be obtained from the Smithsonian.

Photographs of bats have been featured in a number of sections. An accompanying "Teacher's Guide" includes background information on tropical rain forests, suggestions on how to relate rain forest topics to various curricula, and activities to conduct in the classroom and community. A major section features bats and incorporates activities adapted from the Latin American project that BCI's Education Coordinator, Pat Morton, recently completed.*

(Footnote 1)

*BATS, Fall 1988

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