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### Marine World Africa USA Gets Involved with Bats Vaughn, Tonya

by Tonya Vaughn

The 1.2 million visitors that come to Marine World Africa USA each year *expect* to learn about killer whales and dolphins. What they don't expect (and this is what makes it fun) is to learn about bats.

Marine World Africa USA is a wildlife park north of San Francisco in Vallejo, California. The park is owned by the nonprofit Marine World Foundation and is dedicated to furthering an understanding and concern for our world's wildlife. We teach people about conservation through one-on-one interactions with animals and their trainers and through shows, attractions and programs designed to provide education through entertainment.

One of the most popular animals that people see at Marine World is a two year old giant Indian fruit bat (*Pteropus giganteus*) named Burma. She appears in the Wildlife Show, which gives her handlers an opportunity to share bat information with thousands of visitors each week. Because she is trained, guests can see her close-up, prompting questions about her. "When people meet Burma they are amazed," says Mark Jardarian, land animal manager. "She gives people a whole new and positive feeling toward bats. We love to talk about how important they are ecologically." Burma has also gained national attention for her appearance on the "Pat Sajak Show" with Peter Gros, Marine World's Director of Land Animals.

Bats are an important part of Marine World's education programs. Burma is part of the School Assembly Program that visits over 100,000 school children each year. This year the program focused on tropical rain forests. Children learned how important bats are to the growth and regeneration of these areas.

Two years ago, with help from BCI, we were able to obtain two hand-raised big brown bats (*Eptesicus fuscus*) from Sue Barnard, BCI member at Zoo Atlanta. Orville and Wilbur are popular with children who meet them in special "Gentle Touch" classes for young children and with the older kids too in the BATS! BATS! BATS! class. Over 600 children meet our "bat ambassadors" each year in our summer camp program. Through programs like these, kids are able to learn firsthand what marvelous creatures bats are.

In the fall, we have a special Halloween program on misunderstood animals (and what animal is more misunderstood than the bat?). This program has become one of the most popular that the Education Department offers. Last year the attendance topped 400 people, more than double the average.

Marine World has given out over 40,000 copies of Bacardi Rum's informative bat booklet, many during our annual Conservation Week when environmental groups from all over the Bay Area come and share information with the park's visitors. With BCI's help and some great Merlin Tuttle photographs, we set up a bat display where people could pick up information about Bat Conservation International and learn about California's native bats.

Bats and bat houses have been highlighted in our "Tropical Rainforest Teacher's Guide" and in our "Conservation Can't Wait" booklet. We also plan to feature bats in our upcoming teacher's guide on vanishing animals.

Visitors to the Backyard Habitat display will learn how to make their own yards more attractive to wildlife. How can any backyard wildlife habitat be complete without a bat house?

Nothing is as rewarding as giving people information that so completely amazes and surprises them. People already like tigers and dolphins, but to get someone excited about bats...now that's something to be batty about!

(Bio)

*Tonya Vaughn has been a member of BCI for four years and is the Publication and Materials Manager for the Education Department at Marine World Africa USA. For a free copy of the "Rainforest Teacher's Guide" or a "Conservation Can't Wait" booklt, write the Education Department at Marine World Africa USA, Marine World Parkway, Vallejo, CA 94589.*

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*Mark Jardarian teaches a curious audience about "Burma," an Indian flying fox at marine World Africa USA. PHOTO COURTESY OF MARINE WORLD AFRICA USA*

All articles in this issue:

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- [Seeing in the Dark](#)
- [The Volunteer Experience](#)
- [‘Ope’ape’a: Hawaii’s Elusive Native Bat](#)
- [The Project to Save the Hawaiian Bat](#)
- [For the Love of Bats](#)
- [Marine World Africa USA Gets Involved with Bats](#)
- [Survival Anglia and CBS Team Up to Produce Documentary about Bats](#)
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