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A Decade of Bat Conservation

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By Merlin D. Tuttle

People often ask me how and why I founded Bat Conservation International, as though there must have been some inspiring vision or plan behind it. Others are tempted to believe that it must have been a mere means for career enhancement. The truth is far different. Quite frankly, the founding of BCI came as an act of desperation. I had no idea it would become the international center for bat conservation initiatives. A field biologist at heart, I might not have had the courage to found a conservation organization had I known it would grow to consume my life.

Before the existence of BCI, I spent more than half my career in the field, studying bats from the rain forests of Central America to the bush country of East Africa. Wherever I went, it was impossible to ignore that bats were declining at alarming rates and with potentially serious consequences.

From the time I first studied bats as a teenager, I couldn't avoid being concerned. I began my gray bat studies in 1959, work that continued for over 20 years. Evidence of gray bat decline was inescapable. I could measure their rusty-colored stains on cave ceilings and the large deposits of droppings on the floor below--unmistakable evidence of larger past numbers. Local old-timers told me that, when they were children, the sky used to be thick with bats each summer evening, noting that the great flights had simply disappeared.

My first bat conservation efforts involved educating cave explorers and bat cave owners in the southeastern United States about the importance of bats. Despite these early efforts, gray bats continued to decline and were declared endangered in 1976. In 1973 my largest study colony, some 250,000 bats, was destroyed in a single summer. One night I took friends to see the spectacular evening emergence, but the bats never came out. A closer look revealed that fires had been built in the entrance to their cave, and fireworks wrappers littered the floor inside. The cave was accessible only by boat, one of the last places where I would have expected bats to be in danger of vandalism.

It was obvious that without major improvement in public attitudes, the situation for bats would continue to worsen. The rapid decline also alarmed other biologists who studied bats, and some worked hard to help slow the trend. Acting alone, however, our accomplishments were few. We required a great deal of help.

Those of us working in bat research had urgently recommended protective actions to government agencies and conservation organizations. But more often than not, we were ignored. Existing organizations were largely unaware of the importance or plight of bats, and in any event, considered them too hopelessly unpopular to be helped. Year after year, despite clear documentation of severe endangerment and extinctions, no major projects on behalf of bats were funded.

I became Curator of Mammals at the Milwaukee Public Museum in 1975, continuing my work on behalf of bats and conducting frequent lectures. In 1979, the National Geographic Society asked me to write a chapter on bats for their book, *Wild Animals of North America*. When I saw the accompanying photographs, I was appalled that nearly all showed snarling bats, a posture bats display only in self-defense. Knowing that the impression left by such

pictures would thwart the goal of my chapter, I decided to learn to photograph bats and took my own pictures.

More than any other medium, photography showing the true nature of bats helped people begin to appreciate and understand them. So I of course took more pictures, gave more lectures, and published more articles. I was soon overwhelmed with interest and concern from readers and those who attended my lectures, but I lacked the resources to respond.

I was then serving on the Survival Service Commission, Chiroptera Specialist Group, of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), headquartered in the United Kingdom. Dr. Robert Stebbings, chairman of the Chiroptera Specialist Group, and I had commiserated often about the futility of making recommendations, which were ignored simply because bats were unpopular.

We decided to make one more effort, arguing that unpopular animals, regardless of importance, would never be helped unless someone initiated education efforts. Our request for a mere \$25,000 on behalf of a quarter of the world's mammal species was rejected, ironically on the same day that \$300,000 was approved to help pandas. "Bats do not appear to attract funds in the way other projects do," Bob said with the British gift for understatement, commenting on IUCN's own list of urgent projects to fund.

With help from Bob, I finally received funding from the Vincent Wildlife Trust in the U.K. for a different educational project. The grant enabled review of existing medical literature on bats and public health, and publication of a report. Many people believed bats to be dangerous, and such a document would at least provide the facts. Stephen Kern was hired to help me research and prepare the report, and the resulting "Bats and Public Health" was published by the Milwaukee Public Museum at the end of 1981.

Meanwhile, responses to my articles and lectures continued to pour into my office at the Museum, as well as requests for assistance from conservation groups, government agencies, and individuals. It was soon obvious that I had created far more work than I could personally handle. I was desperate for help, originally having little more in mind than a secretary to help me answer all the correspondence I had generated.

People had few places to turn for the help and information they wanted. No organization was then helping bats or providing for their specialized needs. No information existed ready for distribution to the public, and no educational materials about bats had been developed so others could use them to educate still more. An organization was clearly needed. And, I reasoned, funding for bat conservation would be easier to obtain with the authority of an organization behind a project.

Bat Conservation International was officially founded on March 12, 1982. It was headquartered in my office at the Milwaukee Public Museum where I ran the organization nights and weekends. In hope of financial help, we affiliated with the long-established Fauna and Flora Preservation Society (FFPS) and the Chiroptera Specialist Group of IUCN. Bob Stebbings served as one of our first trustees. Verne Read, one of BCI's earliest friends in Milwaukee, was also a founding board member, today serving as chairman.

Steve Kern stayed on as BCI's first employee, funded largely through my own lecture honorariums and research funds. In search of additional assistance and membership support, I continued to lecture, speaking to almost any group who would listen, sometimes to hundreds of people at a time without gaining a single new member. In one exhausting month I had 21 speaking engagements, 16 out-of-state, and numerous media appearances. By the end of our first year BCI had gained barely 100 members and could afford only a single letter informing them how we had spent their money.

We accomplished a great deal that first year. Although we didn't know the results at the time, a visit to Thailand, where we conducted our first international initiative, would lead to permanent protection for two of the country's most important bat caves (*BATS*, Fall 1990). We also distributed "Bats and Public Health" to every state health department in America, giving them long-needed facts about bats. And for the first time we focused national

attention on the value and conservation needs of bats.

In those early years, nearly everyone, Americans in particular, "knew" that bats were carriers of rabies and other dread diseases. Pest control companies often fanned public hysteria, capitalizing on fear of bats and promoting it to take in millions of dollars annually. Public health officials, themselves often misinformed, had assisted growing cycles of negative media campaigns in leading magazines and newspapers. As a result, even conservationists generally had unfavorable opinions of bats.

Ironically, we came to rely heavily on the same media that had so long reviled bats. Had it not been for my recently published articles in *Science* (November 27, 1981) and *National Geographic* (January 1982), BCI might never have been taken seriously. Fortunately, *The Wall Street Journal* investigated, and a front-page article appeared in the October 27, 1983 issue, one of the first positive stories about bats to appear in a national newspaper.

As a result of the publicity, we gained two key trustees, Gordon Sears, then chairman of T. J. Ross, Inc., a leading New York public relations firm, and Bill Walker, president and chief executive officer of Bacardi Imports, Inc. Bill, on behalf of Bacardi, presented us with our first \$10,000 donation, also prompting Bacardi to print one million color brochures for mass public distribution, stating the facts about bats.

In BCI's second year, we gained our first limited support from the conservation community. Working with the State of Florida and the Florida Nature Conservancy, we ensured permanent protection for Judges Cave just days before the owner had planned to bulldoze it shut. The cave is home to one of the most important bat nursery colonies in eastern North America. At our request, the New York Zoological Society funded a Thai graduate student who would go on to become one of his country's leading conservationists and an authority on endangered bumblebee bats (*BATS*, Fall 1988). And the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service funded production of 100,000 brochures on endangered U.S. bats, as well as BCI's first audiovisual program, "Saving America's Bats." Two hundred of these programs were distributed by the Service nationwide to state and federal wildlife agencies. BCI sold hundreds more.

At the end of 1983 we published our first official newsletter, *BATS*, four pages in length. Membership had grown to almost 200, but we were nearly bankrupt. The anticipated financial assistance from FFPS never arrived, and when the long-distance association became increasingly inconvenient, it was discontinued.

Steve Kern, whose hours had already been drastically cut, was forced to resign, but the work continued to grow. Verne and Marion Read, and George Chester, committed \$5,000 through their Chapman Foundation so I could at least hire a half-time secretary to keep BCI going. Heidi Zogg soon became the backbone of BCI and was pivotal to our early success.

Over the next several years BCI continued to generate unprecedented positive publicity for bats. Bats were featured in many national television programs, including ABC's "Good Morning America" and "World News Tonight," NBC's "Today Show" and "Late Night with David Letterman," PBS's "Newton's Apple," and TBS's "National Geographic Explorer." Radio interviews were syndicated to thousands of stations worldwide, and newspaper and magazine stories appeared nearly everywhere, including in most of America's leading newspapers and magazines. Millions of people around the world were reached, and the spin-off effect was dramatic.

BCI was continually swamped with responses from viewers, listeners, and readers. Most were from people seeking assistance or information. Only a relative few sent a donation or asked how they could help, and our financial resources were stressed to the limit from the basic costs of just responding to the mail. Many assumed that any organization able to generate that much publicity must be well-funded, which was far from the truth.

Despite our continually dire financial state, we were able to accomplish much, and membership continued to grow. Some of BCI's earliest achievements included a legislative ban on use of pesticides to kill bats in Wisconsin and protection for one of the world's largest bat hibernating sites at Hubbards Cave, Tennessee. Without the rapidly

increasing public awareness of bat needs, the project would not have been possible. The cave had been purchased earlier by the Tennessee Nature Conservancy as a result of BCI efforts. Led by the Conservancy, the gating project included BCI, the Tennessee National Guard, and cave explorers from five states. The protective gate was designed to allow bats free access to the cave but keep people out. The largest of its kind in the world, the gate weighs more than 120 tons.

BCI also gained its first major research grant for a project to document the vital ecological and economic roles of flying foxes in the Old World tropics. The research revealed that over 300 plant species relied on bats for pollination or seed dispersal, and that more than 450 products used by people were derived from such plants. The study provided information essential for subsequent initiatives to protect flying foxes.

My trip to Australia and the Pacific late in 1985 with board member Verne Read and his wife, Marion, led to the first protection ever for rapidly declining flying fox populations in New South Wales, Australia. On the same trip, a visit to American Samoa resulted a year later in protection for the island's flying foxes and opened the door for the first talks on creating a national park to protect their habitat.

Meanwhile, BCI continued to consult on bat-related matters for numerous state and federal agencies and private conservation organizations. Given an average annual budget of just under \$39,000 for the first four years, our accomplishments certainly were bargain investments!

All of this progress had an unanticipated outcome: I was becoming far too busy to give enough attention to both my position at the Milwaukee Public Museum and to Bat Conservation International. By the end of 1985, I was faced with the difficult choice of giving up the research position I had devoted my life to gaining, or of disbanding BCI after so much hard work and accomplishment. At that point, BCI had almost 900 members, proud of their organization, and among the most loyal any group could boast.

BCI's total available funds then amounted to less than \$10,000. The Reads offered to cover my first year's salary, should BCI prove unable to raise it. With that small security, I made the decision to resign my position at the Milwaukee Public Museum and move BCI to Austin, Texas.

Austin was chosen for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was that it was generating more negative publicity about bats than any other city in America. Mexican free-tailed bats had just begun to move into crevices beneath the newly reconstructed Congress Avenue Bridge, generating frightening stories nationwide. Bold headlines claimed that hundreds of thousands of rabid bats were invading the city and attacking people. I reasoned that any place with so many bats and such access to the media should prove ideal for our purposes.

A development grant from the Richmond Area Speleological Society enabled us to fund the move, also allowing us to purchase our first office equipment. The University of Texas Department of Zoology had offered me Visiting Scholar status along with generous use of office space at their Brackenridge Field Laboratory. Although BCI outgrew the facilities within a year, this help was vital to our initial success.

Heidi Zogg was unable to relocate, so we began in Austin with just a single employee, Mari Murphy, who had been added eight months before, and me. Floods of requests for information followed us to Texas on the heels of new publicity. Linda Moore was soon added as bookkeeper, a position she retains today as part of her job as BCI's Business Manager. Amy McCartney was added a year later, today serving as Membership Coordinator. Mari Murphy remains as Editor and Art Director of *BATS*.

Articles in *The New York Times*, *National Geographic* and *People* magazines, combined with a *National Geographic* President's Page promotion, were vital to our survival that first year, but the unprecedented volume of response taxed BCI's small staff to the limit. Some of us virtually lived at the office, putting in many long hours to keep up with the results of our success. Additional staff were gradually added.

Membership continued to increase, largely due to positive exposure in the media. Early in 1988, membership skyrocketed from 1,500 to nearly 5,000 in response to Diane Ackerman's captivating article in *The New Yorker* (February 27, 1988). Another in *Modern Maturity* (October/November, 1990) by Kerry Givens, one of BCI's charter members, added over 1,000 new members. Both articles played a pivotal role in BCI's growth.

Looking back, it is difficult to believe all that has happened since an "act of desperation" led to the founding of BCI. In just a decade, BCI has grown to over 12,000 members in 55 countries, and has gone from one half-time secretary to a staff of 17. The original board of four trustees has also grown to 16, a group of distinguished professionals who lend their expertise in many areas.

BCI has played a key role in reversing age-old misconceptions about bats. The people of Austin, who in 1985 were signing petitions demanding that the city's "rabid invaders" be poisoned, now value and protect their bats. The Congress Avenue Bridge bats are a major tourist attraction, and their spectacular evening emergences have been featured in a positive light on every major news network in America.

Many of my old gray bat study sites that had lost their bats by the 1970s, now house tens and even hundreds of thousands of bats because of protective actions. And in North America alone, millions of bats are now permanently protected, including the world's largest remaining colony, the 20 million Mexican free-tails of central Texas' famous Bracken Cave.

By hosting an international conference on flying fox conservation needs early in 1990, BCI played a lead role in gaining national and international protective legislation and enforcement. BCI and concerned members, Drs. Paul Cox, Dixie Pierson, and Bill Rainey, were instrumental in gaining passage of a bill through the U.S. Congress that will establish a national park in American Samoa. It will be the first tropical rain forest to become part of the U.S. National Park Service and to protect flying foxes. The park will include a wide variety of habitats, from coral reefs to mountaintop cloud forests.

Education, the cornerstone for lasting conservation results, remains an integral part of BCI's efforts. Much of our success depends on changing long-held misconceptions about bats. The "Educators Activity Book About Bats," "Bats of America" poster, audiovisual programs, and other BCI materials are used by members and educators throughout the United States and Canada. Such materials have helped greatly in other countries as well, from Latin America and the Pacific islands to Australia, Southeast Asia, and Israel. In addition, BCI workshops now train growing numbers of new bat conservationists who themselves are making significant contributions.

As the international center for bat conservation initiatives, BCI provides consultation for hundreds of governmental and private agencies and thousands of individuals each year, often serving as their sole source of information. Responsibilities and opportunities are growing rapidly.

Solving the earth's environmental problems is a challenge of enormous proportions. It took all of us to create our current problems, and it will take working together to solve them. More money is now wasted annually on confrontation and litigation than is spent on actual conservation initiatives, much of it without leading to any real progress. BCI welcomes growing collaboration with private individuals and landowners, with corporations, and with government and private organizations, regardless of history, and regardless of their political, or other, views. BCI hopes to lead the way in the decade ahead in demonstrating that with appropriate education, and cooperation, no cause is too unpopular to be helped, and no problem is too difficult to be solved.

Saving some of the world's traditionally least popular animals may still be one of the greatest challenges in conservation history, but the success of the past 10 years shows considerable hope for the future.

[bio]

Merlin Tuttle is the founder of Bat Conservation International and serves as executive director.



Above: The bats that started it all. Studying gray bats and watching their steady decline is what led Merlin Tuttle to later found Bat Conservation International.



BCI's first international initiative was in Thailand. A later visit by Merlin Tuttle (center) confirmed the tremendous changes; protected from poachers by a warden, millions of bats now prosper.



Above: Building the massive protective gate at Hubbards Cave was a major cooperative effort. Each winter, the cave shelters one of America's largest aggregations of hibernating bats, including endangered gray bats and six other species.



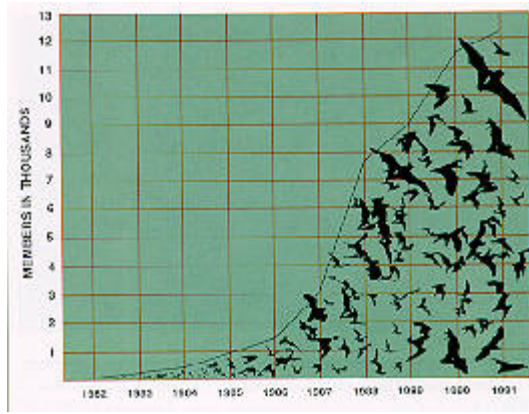
Below: Education is a cornerstone of BCI efforts. Award-winning wildlife cinematographer Dieter Plage filmed the documentary special, "The Secret World of Bats," for CBS television. Merlin Tuttle served as technical advisor during the year's filming around the world.



BCI Chairman of the Board Verne Read (center) received a 1989 Chevron Conservation Award for his many personal efforts to gain protection for Pacific island flying foxes.



American Samoa Governor A.P. Lutali (center) testified before a House subcommittee on behalf of a national park to protect critical flying fox habitat. Due to efforts initiated by BCI, lands were set aside in 1988 for the first national park to include tropical rain forest.



BCI boasts some of the most loyal and dedicated members of any conservation organization. With an average 75% annual renewal rate, many of those who joined BCI in our first year are still supporters today. BCI now has over 12,000 members in 55 countries.



Left: BCI-supported research projects have resulted in significant discoveries. Biologist Ted Fleming climbs a saguaro cactus to check an experiment in our Bat-Cactus Project, a two-year study which documented the importance of endangered long-nosed bats to the Sonoran Desert ecosystem.



Below: BCI educational efforts changed community attitudes from wanting to eradicate the Congress Avenue Bridge bat colony in Austin to treasuring it as a major tourist attraction. A kiosk now tells visitors about the benefits of bats.



Bats like this Marianas flying fox are vital to Pacific island ecosystems, but populations have been devastated by unregulated commercial hunting. BCI's 1990 Pacific Island Flying Fox Conference enabled island wildlife managers to meet with world conservationists to discuss solutions. Further efforts led to the protection of all flying foxes under the CITES treaty, which regulates international commercial trade.



Protecting Bracken Cave, home of the world's largest bat colony, has been a high priority. The central Texas cave is a critical site for Mexican free-tailed bats to rear their young, housing some 20 million individuals each summer. BCI has now acquired two-thirds ownership of the cave.

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