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Educating Through the Media

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Perhaps more than any other means, the news media has played a key role in the success of bat conservation and BCI. Today, many people learn for the first time about the importance of bats and the critical need for their conservation through positive articles in magazines and newspapers and from television or radio programs. Providing accurate information to reporters and others is an important function of BCI, and we assist hundreds of writers and publishers each year, from granting interviews to providing photographs.

But this was not always the case. Before BCI was founded, the climate was decidedly hostile toward bats. No resource center existed to provide the various media with the facts needed to break the cycle of misinformation. And misinformation and negative stories abounded. The public, almost universally believing the often frightening stories, continued to fear and hate bats.

Established publications like *Good Housekeeping* and *Family Circle* ran sensationalized stories; "Three Years of Terror--A Real Life Ordeal" and "The Nightmare House" were both about homes "infested" with bats. The latter story claimed that bats attacked the windows and sides of the house for four nights in a row, "imprisoning" the family until dawn in a scene reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds." Pest control operators offered little real help, frightening them even more with gross misinformation. Readers were further misinformed, the articles playing on their worst fears.

Such stories were fairly typical. In Austin, Texas, newspaper headlines like "Bat colonies sink teeth into city," and "Mass fear in the air as bats invade Austin," used to be common when the city's numerous bats returned each spring.

In BCI's early years, the idea of an organization devoted exclusively to the conservation of bats--creatures that evoked fear and hatred--was such a novelty that newspaper and magazine editors were intrigued enough to want stories about it. But they soon discovered that, far from being a passing novelty, BCI had a serious mission and one worth paying attention to.

Positive stories began to appear, illustrated with photographs of bats as no one had ever seen them before. Gone were bats snarling with bared teeth into the camera. Instead, bats were shown in their natural habitat, looking curious, even cute, anything but ferocious.

Today bats are actually on the way to becoming popular in the United States. Negative stories still occasionally run, but they are far outnumbered by the positive. Public appreciation of bats has grown dramatically, so much so that irresponsible media stories now typically draw intense criticism, often from BCI members. Two years ago when Ann Landers ran negative and erroneous comments about bats in answer to a letter, she was

deluged with complaints and vowed she would never mention bats again!

No matter how people have felt about bats, they have always found them fascinating. But today they are discovering that the truth is far more interesting than the myth.



Before BCI, sensational headlines did much to create fear of bats. Photos of snarling bats only perpetuated the belief that bats were aggressive and dangerous, but the same bat, when not provoked into defensive behavior, is in reality a gentle animal.

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