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Working at BCI

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by Mari Murphy

When I began working at Bat Conservation International nearly seven years ago, I confess I knew almost nothing about bats. My own ignorance aside, the reaction of my friends when I told them about my new job made me realize what this young conservation group was up against. "You're kidding me! Bats? **Ugh!**" Even the most sympathetic only looked puzzled, saying "But why do they need conserving? Aren't there plenty of them?"

And so began my own education and fledgling attempts to tell people about bats. Although BCI was having the impact of a far larger organization, it was small when I began working here in 1985. There were only about 500 members and two permanent staff, Heidi Zogg having been the lone employee since 1983. Merlin Tuttle, then Curator of Mammals at the Milwaukee Public Museum, had hired me to take over production of BCI's four-page quarterly newsletter, *BATS*, and to assist with general duties in anticipation of a move to Texas. Heidi would be unable to relocate.

BCI's first headquarters were in Merlin's small office at the Museum. A massive desk dominated the room. In the center stood a large cage containing two bats Merlin had brought back from his last trip to Africa--Zuri, a straw-colored flying fox, and Rafiki, an Angolan fruit bat. The office was a maze of pass-through-sideways aisles between our various posts. Even the top of the bat cage occasionally served as a work surface. We said "excuse me" a lot. When I needed to lay out *BATS*, I took my drawing board down to the quiet of the taxidermy lab where I spread out under the watchful eye of a cast of Samson the Gorilla, recently departed of the Milwaukee County Zoo. It was definitely the most unusual job I had ever had.

I went on a crash course to learn everything I could about bats before the move. Working with Merlin's massive photo collection, I became fairly knowledgeable about bats and how to identify them. I learned even more by editing articles written by scientists, "translating" them for the lay public, and later researching to write articles of my own.

Letters arrived each day, wanting to know more about BCI or asking for help with a bat "nuisance" problem or conservation issue. We were always pleased to recognize the name when someone later became a member or thanked us for our efforts with a donation. Unfortunately, many more did not. People were curious about what we did, but actively supporting us was often another matter. Many assumed that with all of the publicity we generated, we were a much larger organization with a full staff and unlimited resources, an image we struggle with even today.

The single-line telephone rang almost constantly. Everyone who had so much as a lone bat wander into their house called wondering how to get rid of it. I listened in amazement as Merlin patiently told caller after caller how to solve their problems, going on to tell them what wonderful creatures bats are and how they should appreciate them. Some took lengthy

persuasion.

I learned what the other end of the conversation was when Merlin was out in the field, and I had to put my new training into practice to answer such calls myself. The caller would frequently be in hysterics and in no mood to listen to reason. I added "phone psychologist" to my job description.

Soon after our arrival in Texas early in 1986, Linda Moore joined our staff of two on a halftime basis. That fall, a Halloween feature in the *New York Times* about BCI's new bat houses created more interest than ever before. Suddenly BCI began receiving hundreds of letters a day; by the end of the second week there were well over 1,000, more than 10 times the norm, with no sign of slowing. They arrived faster than we could open, read, and sort them--let alone answer. Even after exhaustive hours and working weekends, we were still far behind.

With a staff that small, we had long since devised simple form letters to respond to the general mail. But even these were individually addressed, signed, and stamped. Our computer skills rudimentary, Linda and I had only just learned to "merge" a list of names and addresses with a form letter, but our two manual printers generated only about one page a minute, each time requiring us to hit a "go" key to print another. Many other letters asked specific questions or needed help with specific problems, requiring individual answers.

Working at BCI was never the same again; publicity only generated more publicity. It was clear we not only needed more staff, we also needed to create new positions to address the growing diversity of our jobs, which seemed to be invented as we went along.

At that point I was editor of *BATS*, handled all media requests for photos, was in charge of membership, and answered all general information requests and public correspondence requiring individual answers. Linda, originally hired as bookkeeper, also did dictation for Merlin (who often answered up to 50 letters at a time), processed bat house sales, handled the budget, and took minutes at board meetings. We both answered the phone, filed, traded as zookeeper for the bats, and much much more.

Working at BCI today is a good deal different but no less diverse. Many of the tasks that only two people handled in BCI's early years are now full-time responsibilities and have been passed on to others. Seventeen people now work at BCI, and we're still growing.

The phone rings even more--today with calls from all over the world. After a major newspaper or magazine article, letters arrive literally by the bushel, some mailed from overseas with little more address than "the bat 'institute,' Austin, Texas." But with more than just two people to handle the flood, far more sophisticated computer technology, and a postage meter, responding is thankfully much less painful.

Unlike most other conservation groups, BCI deals on a daily basis with both individuals and agencies who not only request information, but who also request assistance or advice, some of it highly technical. People ask us how to evict bats from buildings, what to do with the injured bat they just found, or to address their fears about rabies. Others want to inform us of a local bat conservation need (often urgent and requiring our immediate attention), or to tell us we simply must write a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine. Some just want to share their experiences with bats.

Last year BCI responded to some 20,000 requests for information and assistance. As the only organization of our kind dealing with bat conservation and management issues on a global level,

BCI is often the only place they can turn.

Today when I tell people where I work, I occasionally still get the same response I did seven years ago. But more often than not, their eyes light up when they recognize the name Bat Conservation International, and they say "You're with the bat people? Neat!"

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*These are the dedicated and hard-working people who make up the staff at BCI, with the year they joined us. Standing in front of BCI's new home, top row from left to right, Cindy Lind, Director of Development and Public Information (1987); Sylvia Gomez, Administrative Assistant (1991); Mari Murphy, BATS Editor (1985); Marianne Austin, Catalogue and Mail Coordinator (1988); Amy McCartney, Membership Coordinator (1987); Bryan Ockert, Information Systems Manager (1988); Marshall Cobb, Public Information Assistant (1992). Center row, left to right, Pat Morton, Director of Education (1988); Tracey Tarlton, Science Assistant (1991); Janet Debelak, Education Assistant (1989). Front row left to right, Andy Smith, Development Assistant (1990); Merlin Tuttle, Founder and Executive Director (1982); Donna Hensley, Science Assistant (1991); Linda Moore, Business Manager (1986); Linda Rogers, Chief Operating Officer (1990). Not shown, Alan Tennant, Special Projects Consultant (1992).*

All articles in this issue:

- ▶ [ON THE COVER](#)
- ▶ [A Decade of Bat Conservation](#)
- ▶ [THE FIRST TEN YEARS](#)
- ▶ [National Geographic Society Receives BCI's First Distinguished Achievement](#)
- ▶ [The Next 10 Years: A Look to the Future](#)
- ▶ [Educating Through the Media](#)
- ▶ [Zuri: Bat Superstar](#)
- ▶ [Photography and bat conservation](#)
- ▶ [Working at BCI](#)
- ▶ [Celebrate BCI's 10th Anniversary Through a Gift for Life and Legacy](#)
- ▶ [A New Home for BCI](#)
- ▶ [A personal note from the founder of BCI](#)
- ▶ [The Good Fortune of Bats](#)