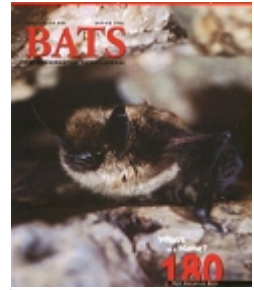



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A Children's Crusade
Diane D. Jones

Washington, Missouri, has officially become, by proclamation of its city council, a bat-friendly city. And that barely scratches the surface of what middle-school students at St. Francis Borgia Grade School have accomplished while taking bats from a study topic to a direct-action crusade.



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It began with a visit by conservationist Matt Soete, who described the nature of bats for teacher Steve Murrie's sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade science classes. Soete, a woodworker, had built and installed bat houses along the town's three-mile riverfront trail as part of an environmentally gentle approach to insect control.

Upon learning that bats had little in common with their frightful misperceptions and were, in fact, both gentle and highly beneficial, the students decided to spread the word about bat conservation. They've been educating younger children about bats and writing to local agencies and authorities. They even 'adopted' a bat through Bat Conservation International.

The effort, says Murrie, a teacher for 33 years, 'is an in-depth theme that fits in perfectly with the school's Christian mission. God made all creatures and made them for a purpose – including bats. Bats are misunderstood, the underdogs of the animal kingdom. The kids have really embraced that theme.'

Among many projects, students created bat trivia board games, such as "Batopoly," and wrote and illustrated children's books (*A Week in the Life of Billy Bob Bat*). Student essays touting the contributions of bats to the ecosystem were published in the local newspaper.

The youngsters wrote to members of the state legislature, asking that bats be named Missouri's "official flying mammal," and they urged the Missouri Department of Transportation to build its bridges with one-inch gaps underneath to give bats safe and inviting roosts.

"We learned a lot about how much bats really help human populations," said Maggie Light, an eighth grader. "We wanted to help other people learn about them, too."

A life-size picture of the bat the students adopted through BCI – a particularly photogenic creature called a Wahlberg's epauleted fruit bat (*Epomophorus wahlbergi*) – hangs on a wall of the science lab, its endearingly chubby cheeks reminding all who pass just how unthreatening bats really are.

The young people learned about much more than just the benefits of bats, Murrie says. "The kids have learned that there are ways to go about getting things done if they know how to approach the right channels."

Diane D. Jones is a writer in Washington, Missouri.

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