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BCI Establishes New Program Department for Bats in Mines

Saving bats that roost in abandoned mines is one of the most urgent issues facing bat conservation today. It is also one of the most complex: while some old mines provide critical habitat for bats, they also may pose a significant public safety hazard. In addition, some environmentalists also want to see the land returned to its "pristine" pre-mine conditions. Trying to find solutions that satisfy all of these concerns is not an easy task.

Last year, BCI took an important step toward addressing the problem by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Bureau of Land Management [*BATS*, Summer 1993]. Some 270 million acres of BLM land contain hundreds of thousands of inactive mines. Part of the agreement includes a directive to survey mines for bats on these public lands before action to close them is undertaken. BCI is now establishing a new program department to address the issue on a full-time basis. Matching funds provided by the BLM and Verne and Marion Read, combined with member contributions, will enable us to embark upon a three-year concerted effort, beginning in March, to develop and implement solutions.

In the last few years many state governments have stepped up mine closure efforts in an attempt to address public safety concerns. Most of the closures have been undertaken without consideration of bats. The actual extent of bat loss is unknown, but millions of bats may already have been buried, and several large populations have been saved in the nick of time.

Nevada is now dealing with the issue head on and has virtually turned around their mine closure program. Since the state legislature established the Abandoned Mine Lands Program to deal with public safety concerns, some 3,000 inactive mines have been closed, about half of which were backfilled. An estimated 50,000 sites remain. Since the legislature created the mandate with only public safety in mind, no provision was originally made for biological assessment.

Despite considerable public ridicule from some groups about "devoting...energy to non-game animals such as bats," officials at the Nevada Division of Wildlife formally requested last September that the state's Division of Minerals work with them so that mines could be assessed for bats before closure and their presence taken into account when determining when, and how, closure would be accomplished. The Division of Minerals responded favorably by calling a meeting to discuss the problem and possible solutions. Key communication from BCI members working in Nevada helped open doors for biologists to participate. Wildlife biologists from all over the country were invited, along with state officials, representatives from mining companies and state and federal agencies, and other interested parties. BCI staff biologist Tracey Tarlton participated in the October meeting as well as in a follow-up roundtable workshop in January. Also participating in the workshop were BCI members and bat biologists Elizabeth Pierson, William Rainey, Patricia Brown, Kirk Navo, Ginny and Dave Dalton, and Scott Altenbach. BCI was the only conservation organization involved.

As a result of these meetings, Nevada has ceased to backfill mines without going through a

process to determine if bats might be present and, if so, how to satisfy both safety and conservation concerns. The state has also effectively enabled diverse agencies, under whose joint jurisdiction a given mine may fall, to address the issue cooperatively.

Other states may also soon find themselves dealing with this problem. Late last year, both houses of Congress finally passed versions of a bill to reform the General Mining Law of 1872 [*BATS*, Summer 1993, Fall 1991]. Part of the highly debated and complex bill addresses reclamation issues and, as a result of participation from BCI and member Patricia Brown, also contains language designed to protect existing wildlife habitat in mines. Now in committee, a final version of the bill has not yet been agreed upon. Even when signed into law, the biological assessment provision that conservationists fought for is only the beginning. We now must help devise effective methods of determining whether bats are present, covering many different circumstances throughout the country. This effort will be a huge and complex task.

Working proactively to find solutions, Nevada is providing an excellent model for how state and federal agencies can collaborate with conservationists. Other states that are also making progress toward turning around their approach to bats and mine closure are Michigan, Colorado, and New Mexico. As a result of BCI efforts, Michigan saved from the bulldozer one of the world's largest hibernating bat populations ever discovered and is now surveying other mines for bats [*BATS*, Summer 1993, Winter 1993]. In Colorado, BCI member Kirk Navo has established the Colorado Bats-Inactive Mines Project, which BCI is helping to sponsor. His volunteer program has saved a number of important bat maternity sites. The state of New Mexico is working with bat biologist Scott Altenbach to integrate surveys for bats into its abandoned and inactive mine reclamation program.

BCI's new program department will provide support to these and other states addressing this issue. Working together to identify and protect essential sites, we can ensure a future for millions of America's bats.



Hundreds of thousands of abandoned mines like this are part of massive state and federal efforts to "reclaim" the land. When mine entrances are sealed without checking for bats, many bat populations are buried alive.

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