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Businesses for Bats

Corporate sponsors make conservation work in the Cayman Islands

Lois Blumenthal

Bat Conservation International has worked, since its founding 25 years ago, to build alliances rather than enmity with industry whenever possible. We have repeatedly demonstrated the value of this "win-win" philosophy through our many corporate partners who have donated money, time, materials, equipment, expertise and much more toward bat-conservation projects around the world. In the Cayman Islands of the Caribbean, longtime BCI Member Lois Blumenthal proves once again how much can be accomplished by combining enthusiastic volunteers with the support of business.

Attitudes about bats in the Cayman Islands have changed dramatically since I began the National Trust Bat Conservation Program in 1994. Back then, they were called "rat-bats" and routinely exterminated. Today, pest-control companies exclude bats humanely from homes and buildings, and most residents of the three Cayman Islands have learned to appreciate the ecological and economic values of our nine species of bats "the islands' only native mammals.

This remarkable transformation would not have been possible without the steadfast support of dedicated corporate partners. With their help, the Cayman Islands' bat conservation program is the largest and most successful in the Caribbean. Partners include Caribbean Utilities Co. Ltd. (CUC), the Marriott Grand Cayman Beach Resort, Cayman Airways, the Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman, and Truly Nolan (Reliable Industries, Grand Cayman).


We believe our cooperative success offers a model that can be reproduced throughout much of the Caribbean and beyond. We don't simply ask for funds, but urge businesses to share both the projects and the credit.

Bat houses are the core of our conservation work. They offer a positive solution to which people respond well. We now have more than 50 customized pairs of nursery houses (each capable of holding more than 300 bats) at strategic locations around the 75 square miles (196 square kilometers) of Grand Cayman.

CUC is the cornerstone of the project. Utility poles are ideal for mounting bat houses, and CUC donates the poles and installs them. This has been crucial to our success. When Hurricane Ivan, one of the worst storms ever to sweep the Caribbean, battered the Cayman Islands with 155 mile-per-hour (260 kilometer-per-hour) winds for two days in September 2004, all 43 existing bat houses mounted on CUC utility poles survived "with the bats safely inside.

A utility company, which already has the poles, equipment and manpower, is a perfect fit for this kind of project, and the conservation value of the donation far exceeds the cost to the company. "We are pleased to contribute to the efforts of the National Trust in providing alternative habitat for our only native mammal," said Caren Thompson of CUC.



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Pallas's mastiff bats (*Molossus molossus*) living in roof spaces were once a major concern for residents of the Cayman Islands. Tropical bats are active year-round and Caribbean roof spaces are usually small and inaccessible. This, combined with high humidity, can create a significant odor problem when large colonies inhabit a building.

Previously, the typical reaction to roof colonies was to try to kill the bats. Now most people turn to the effective, humane and environmentally sound exclusion devices introduced by our program. Wherever possible, we place a bat house nearby. As program manager, I try to visit every site to personally supervise exclusions. My presence is becoming less necessary as Truly Nolan, our largest pest-control company, has committed to using only our recommended exclusion methods.

In Cayman, bat houses do much more than provide shelter for important native wildlife. They help win new friends for bats across the islands. Bat houses offer a welcome option for people struggling with bats in their roofs, and many homeowners tell us that having a bat house in their garden reduces insects and livens up conversation when the bats come pouring out in the evenings. Bat houses also anchor education programs for both children and adults.

Our unique bat-house design, modified from BCI plans by local carpenter Ron Moser, is actually two "standard nursery houses" placed back-to-back with a single roof and a channel in the center that fits neatly over the top of a utility pole. Mounting for the CUC crew is a simple matter of fitting the bat house onto the pole like a hat and then running a few bolts through the landing pads.

Our bat houses had been built by prison inmates, the government Public Works Department and volunteer carpenters. But thanks to the recent collaboration with Marriott Beach Resort, we have again improved the design and are building 50 more bat houses, doubling the current number.

The Marriott's donation of materials, as well as employee time and expertise, has a value to the conservation work that exceeds actual expenditures. This is a high-profile, low-cost donation with visible and concrete benefits.

Bryan Badrick, Chief Engineer at the Marriott Beach Resort in Grand Cayman, made additional modifications so the space between the paired houses provides homes for woodpeckers and parrots. His staff even paints decorative birds and bats on the houses. The sections that shelter bats are painted dark for extra warmth, while the bird area is a lighter shade for cooler inside temperatures. This design has already proved successful for West Indian woodpeckers, and we hope the beloved and colorful Cayman parrots will also find safe homes in the structures.

As part of the Know Your Islands Program, the National Trust holds interpreted "fly-outs" as bats emerge for a night of hunting insects. We explain the benefits of tropical bats and serve bat-dependent drinks and snacks while people watch hundreds of Pallas's mastiff bats swoop from their lofty home and disappear into the sunset. Both the Marriott and the Ritz-Carlton now have their own bat houses, and the program is providing informative literature and interpreted "fly-outs" for hotel guests and tourists.

The Marriott decided to throw its support to the program after learning "to appreciate the ecological importance of bats to the ecosystems of our country," said Laura-Ann

Howard of the Marriott Grand Cayman Beach Resort. “Marriott supports combating the bat-roosting issues we face in roofs, especially in the tropics, with a true long-term solution that is eco-friendly and benefits humans directly” especially in regard to insect pest control “ and that means bat houses.”

Meanwhile, Truly Nolan and the Ritz-Carlton Grand Cayman, are co-sponsoring publication of Cayman Islands™ Bats Study Guide. Every teacher in every school in the country will receive a copy of this important resource, produced by the National Trust and integrated into the nation™s education curriculum. It is now also included in the Ritz-Carlton™s Jean-Michelle Cousteau Ambassadors for the Environment Program.

Most schools on Grand Cayman have a bat house perched on a pole at the edge of their grounds. With the new study guide and classroom presentations by National Trust staff and volunteers, it™s easy to see why Cayman Islands™ children are among the most knowledgeable in the Caribbean about the many benefits of bats.

Solid research underpins most effective conservation and public-education efforts, and Cayman Airways has been providing air transportation for scientists conducting important research on bats and other fauna and flora since 1997. This again illustrates the wisdom of matching donations to the donors™ abilities and resources to maximize the benefits to the program in relation to actual expense of the business.

The contributions of these five companies, as well as various government departments (Environmental Health, Planning, Public Works, Education and Department of Environment) underlie the continued effectiveness of the program. We would like to see our successes, especially the Bat House Project, repeated throughout the tropics. Every country has a utility company, and Marriott Resorts, a company committed to contributing to the communities in which they are located, operates worldwide. The opportunities for bat conservation are enormous. I would be delighted to share what I™ve learned and provide written resources that can be modified to meet the needs of each island or nation.

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