

# BAT CONSERVATION

## INTERNATIONAL

### Environmental Education at the Congress Avenue Bridge in 2006

*Final Report, January 2007*

#### Summary

Bat Conservation International's mission includes three core strategies related to protecting bats—conservation, research and education. At Austin's Congress Avenue Bridge in 2006, BCI engaged thousands of people, one-on-one, in an education program that taught these families and tourists vital information about bats and their importance, both to our Central Texas environment and to our state's economy. Trained educators staffed an information booth and circulated through the crowds that had come to watch the famous evening emergences of the world's largest urban bat colony. BCI was able to capitalize on this unique setting to teach simple ecological concepts and to encourage an appreciation for these gentle animals and their protection. Evaluations of this program, based on visitor feedback, were overwhelmingly positive, and the revenues it generated were nearly twice its costs.

*"I especially enjoyed the literature provided, which helped me to understand the biology and the amazing varieties of this animal. I was inspired to plan to build a bat house near my home on Cape Cod. I now realize how beneficial the bats are to the ecology. Thank you for providing expert and friendly guides as well."* – Survey Respondent

#### Background

Because of people's fascination with bats, these important animals offer a natural lead-in for teaching people about the environment. In the last twenty years, BCI has worked to educate the public about how animals like bats are critically important to both people and nature. In Central Texas, BCI has achieved tremendous success: In the early 1980's, when Mexican free-tailed bats began roosting in the recently renovated Congress Avenue Bridge, local citizens feared them, and some residents even began signing petitions to have



the bats eradicated. The newly formed BCI began one of its first major public-education campaigns, teaching people about the benefits that these bats brought to the city and environment. The bats were saved, public opinion shifted and crowds began coming to watch their nightly “emergences.” Today the bridge’s bats are an international tourist attraction that annually brings ten million dollars to the region.\* BCI’s education efforts at the bridge start with bats and quickly segue into teaching about all living organisms, ecosystems and the importance of conservation.

Bats are among the most important animals on earth, not only for their pivotal places in natural ecosystems, but also for their various roles in supporting human economies. In Central Texas, the single colony of bats living under the Congress Avenue Bridge consumes literally thousands of tons of crop- and yard-destroying insect pests every summer, drastically reducing our need for pesticides. Despite the importance of bats, however, they are among the most misunderstood and imperiled animals on earth.

Bats fall victim to a variety of pressures, including habitat destruction as well as unintentional or even intentional extermination by people who are simply misinformed about their value. Even here in Texas, Mexican free-tailed bats continue to be seriously threatened, and entire colonies of millions of bats have been needlessly lost. The plight of bats in our world is serious, but it is not hopeless—the key to the long-term protection of bats and the ecosystems that rely on them is education.



## Program Highlights

*“Everything about my visit was delightful. I gathered lots of informative print matter from you folks seated under your little ‘tent.’ Everyone was so helpful and enthusiastic. I’m a teacher in Massachusetts. Our second graders study bats in a science unit, and they get so excited and involved. I brought lots of materials back for my elementary school colleagues to use in their classrooms. And I took many, many photos of the bridge, the swarming bats, and all the beautiful brass signs located in the park near the bridge. Thank you, BCI, for making this visit very special!” – Another Survey Respondent*

From the beginning of June through the end of August, three BCI educators were on site at the Congress Avenue Bridge on Thursday–Sunday evenings. They set up a BCI information tent next to the bridge, on the grassy area created and maintained as a public service by the neighboring *Austin American-Statesman*. By talking to people who came up to the tent and by circulating through the crowd, the educators together spoke one-on-one with about 50 people per night, totaling between 2,000–3,000 people over the course of the Summer. Many thousands more came by the tent simply to pick up brochures and other materials.

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\* Dr. Gail Ryser and Roxana Popovici’s study, *The Fiscal Impact of the Congress Avenue Bridge Bat Colony on the City of Austin*, was completed and published in 1999. At that time, the total impact was estimated at \$8,000,000.

In their conversations with people, the BCI educators were trained to keep their message simple by focusing on 2 or 3 “bullet points.” Typically, these included the value of bats to our environment and economy as predators of crop pests, a warning not to touch bats (or any other wild animals) and the importance of environmental conservation in general. From there, the educators were trained to listen and respond to visitors’ questions, and this was an effective way to dispel many common myths about bats. For instance, visitors often asked about rabies (no one in Austin has ever gotten rabies from a bat), bat physiology (many bats have excellent vision) and bat life histories (Mexican free-tail bats give birth to only one “pup” per year, only half of which survive to adulthood). 85% of our survey respondents who interacted with one of the BCI educators found that interaction “very helpful,” and over 94% were able to correctly identify the species of the bridge bats from a list, a testament to the effectiveness of this approach.

The efforts of the BCI educators were complemented by a variety of free hand-outs. These included brochures about the bats and the environment, copies of BCI’s *BATS* magazine, BCI stickers and a newsletter-type publication created specifically for the Congress Avenue Bridge, the *Freetail Flyer*. The *Freetail Flyer* was printed as a pro-bono contribution to BCI’s efforts by the *Austin American-Statesman*. This latter piece was by far the most popular and effective, and it included educational content as well as information about BCI, fun facts, coming events and, prominently, a list of the financial supporters of BCI’s education programs. About 16,000 *Freetail Flyers* were distributed over the course of the Summer at the bridge, at nearby hotels and restaurants and through the Austin Convention & Visitors Bureau. Even still, we were not able to meet the demand for them.



Over the course of the Summer, there were several special events that focused on the bats at the Congress Avenue Bridge. The 1st Annual Bat Run 5k, organized by RunTex and the RunTex Foundation, took place on July 28th. Almost five hundred people participated in this “fun run” (happily exceeding RunTex’s expectations), including Governor Rick Perry and a few local celebrities. On Labor Day Weekend, September 2–3, the Congress Avenue Bridge was closed for BatFest, a family-friendly celebration of music, food, art and bat-related fun. BCI staffed a central booth at BatFest, offering information, bat-themed products for sale and a learning activity for families. While both of these events were more recreational than



educational, they provided plenty of exposure for BCI, the bats and the sponsors of the education programs. Dozens of volunteers were involved, a number of whom were from sponsor and partner organizations.

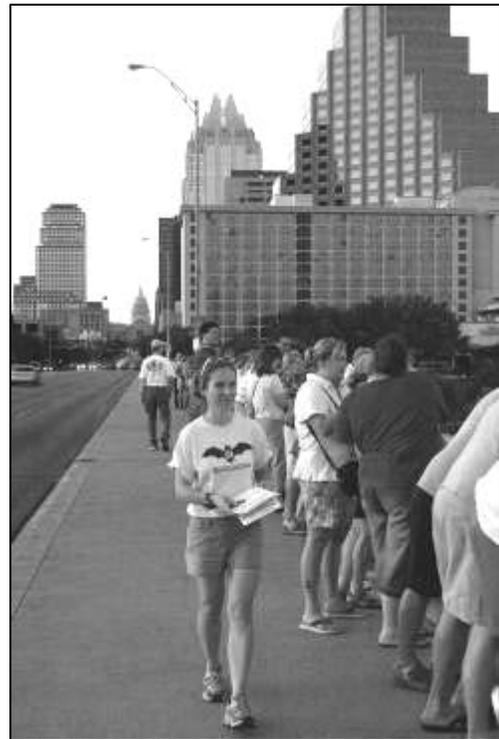
Media attention during the Summer was very positive. In addition to the usual small pieces about the “bat-viewing season” in local publications and media outlets, our sponsor KXAN TV started a new effort to mention the bats regularly during the weather report on the

local news. Also, we were fortunate to host celebrities Quentin Tarantino and Fiona Apple at the bridge, filming a one-hour conversational show for the Sundance Channel. The bridge bats were featured briefly on the Travel Channel, the Food Channel and the worldwide Voice of America radio network, among others.

## Evaluation

BCI's education program at the Congress Avenue Bridge was evaluated based on visitor feedback, on performance assessments of the on-site staff and on the revenues and expenditures associated with the program. Visitor feedback was collected opportunistically as well as via a formalized online survey that was sent to people who provided their email addresses at the bridge. This was the first time that a survey of this kind was employed for this program, and 150 people completed the survey. The results were extremely interesting and helpful. Among the highlights are the following:

- Over 80% of survey respondents were from outside of the Austin area, contradicting the perception that this is simply a “local program.”
- Over 70% were visiting the Congress Avenue Bridge for the first time, indicating that our efforts there are regularly reaching new audiences.
- 99% of respondents were not members of BCI, and 25% of them requested that a membership application be mailed to them.
- Over 20% of respondents had average family incomes over \$100,000. The potential existence of disposable income among these visitors means that they have not only an interest in bats (because they came to bridge and had positive experiences at a ratio of 9 to 1) but also the potential of becoming BCI supporters.
- Almost half of survey respondents received information about BCI's plans for an education center at the Bracken Bat Cave & Nature Reserve (on the outskirts of San Antonio) for the first time. Also, approximately 70% of respondents said they would be willing to travel an hour or more to visit Bracken.
- Many visitors offered terrific suggestions and feedback in response to the open-ended questions in the survey.



*“The viewing was spectacular! I really appreciated both the interpretive signage and the info from the BCI educators. Possibly, you could add some interpretive signs up on the bridge itself as I'm not sure some visitors make it down to the park...”* – Another Survey Respondent

## Investors and Partners

The organizations that made direct financial investments in this program in 2006 included:

- Alamo Draffhouse Cinemas
- The Austin Convention & Visitors Bureau
- Frost Bank
- KGSR 107.1
- Lone Star Riverboats
- Roadway Productions

BCI also received substantial in-kind support for this program from the Austin Convention & Visitors Bureau, the *Austin American-Statesman*, KGSR 107.1, KXAN TV, Lone Star Riverboats, REI and the Shoreline Grill.

## Opportunities for the Future

BCI identified a number of opportunities for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the education program at the Congress Avenue Bridge, some of which were suggested by members of the public via our online survey. We will seriously consider the possibility of implementing many of these in 2007 and beyond:

- Brush and small trees at the Bat Observation Area have not been trimmed in several years, and they are now tall enough to impede bat flight and hinder visibility for the gathered crowds. BCI hopes to identify a tree-trimming company that will donate its services to help address this problem.
- There was more demand for on-site educators and for our published educational materials than we were able to meet this year. We will assess the feasibility of adding additional nights to our schedule at the bridge, and we will consider printing more copies of the *Freetail Flyer*.
- Much of the public signage at the Congress Avenue Bridge, both for education and for logistics like parking, is in poor condition and is deteriorating rapidly. This issue will demand attention in 2007.
- The process of printing the *Freetail Flyer* was less smooth than it could have been in 2006, resulting in insufficient print runs and the inclusion of some minor but noticeable formatting errors in the final product. BCI will reevaluate this process for future years.
- As indicated on page 2 of this report, the study measuring the economic impact of tourism at the Congress Avenue Bridge is now eight years old. It would be helpful to update this research to account for inflation and increased tourism at the bridge.
- Sponsors of BCI's education program were recognized in the *Freetail Flyer*, on the t-shirts worn by the educators, on BCI's website and in public communications. Nonetheless, public feedback indicated that sponsor-logo recognition was low. Therefore, BCI has identified additional opportunities for sponsor exposure that will be considered for future efforts.

BCI has begun an ambitious three-year plan to reinvigorate its public-education efforts with regard to bats and the environment. These efforts will include teacher trainings, new and revised publications and additional programs for the public. Some of these offerings will be targeted at national audiences, and BCI's efforts at the Congress Avenue Bridge will be integrated with this larger effort in a number of ways. BCI hopes to one day be recognized as a national leader in community-based environmental education.

