

## National Zoo Virginia Big-Eared Bat Project

In November, the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute (formerly the Conservation and Research Center) accepted 40 endangered Virginia big-eared bats to establish a security population before the devastating white-nose syndrome could reach their habitat in West Virginia. The National Zoo responded to a request from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and was subsequently awarded a grant for this risky project. Although this opportunity was available through a competitive process to all legitimate research organizations, no other group accepted FWS's formal challenge. While other groups have worked with insectivorous (insect-eating) bats, no other organization has worked with this particular subspecies in captivity.

Despite around-the-clock care, 30 of the 40 bats have died over the past four months. No one has ever kept this subspecies of insect-eating bats alive in captivity for this duration. The announcement of the deaths triggered the nonprofit Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility to file a formal complaint with the FWS on Monday, March 8 about the SCBI's care of the animals. That complaint was based on a report from a consultant the Zoo hired for three weeks (one week prior to the bats' arrival and the first two weeks the bats were in captivity). She was contracted to advise SCBI on bat capture techniques and husbandry for the program. During her time with us, her advice was inconsistent and often unsupported. Many of her claims, which form the bulk of the complaint, are unsubstantiated and untrue. Here are a few of more than a dozen examples of those false claims:

- The contractor claimed the bats were not maintained in 'compliance.' In actuality, the SCBI team solicited the advice of numerous experts, including those at Bat World, a nonprofit organization, and followed guidelines established by working groups with expertise on this particular subspecies and related bat species. The SCBI's bat team (experts in husbandry, veterinary medicine and nutrition) carefully adjusted protocols based on the real needs of the bats under its care. Two staff members were trained at Bat World and another had volunteered at Bat World NOVA.
- The contractor claimed that prolonged exposure to excessive heat in an incubator increased the rate of capture myopathy (muscle disease) for the bats. Not only has there not been a single case of capture myopathy, there is no evidence that supplemental heat from an incubator was associated with any death. SCBI's veterinary staff is extremely knowledgeable of animal physiology, diagnostics and appropriate treatments and followed the recommendations made by trained and board-certified veterinarians.
- The contractor claimed that SCBI's staff had a lack of expertise and disregard for proper veterinary care. SCBI's head veterinarian has eight years of formal training, followed by an additional four years of post-doctoral specialty training in zoological medicine and is certified as a boarded specialist by the American College of Zoological Medicine, and has spent more than 10 years working with wildlife. The veterinary technicians at SCBI have several years of experience working exclusively with endangered species. The consultant has no veterinary degree, no veterinary technical training and misrepresents herself in this regard as an expert in veterinary medicine.
- The contractor claimed SCBI made no effort to provide additional food sources. However, SCBI scientists tested alternative foods and repeatedly offered the bats crickets, wax worms, silkworms, silkworm moths and commercial moths.
- The contractor claimed SCBI staff made unnecessary intrusions and disturbances into the bat colony. Disturbance was kept to an absolute minimum – no one other than husbandry personnel

were ever allowed in the space. Except for the animals in critical care, none of the bats were moved.

SCBI carried out this project with the input and advice from experts from within the Smithsonian and around the country. In this regard, SCBI continues its long history of accepting challenges with previously unstudied, rare and highly sensitive endangered species. The National Zoo has contributed to the recovery and return of the black-footed ferret to the America West; to doubling the number of giant pandas in captivity in China in the last decade; and to establishing a captive breeding program for Panamanian golden frogs. The conservation successes of our staff speak for themselves.

The Smithsonian's National Zoo takes the loss of these bats very seriously. However, we will continue to lead, learn and use this knowledge to help develop the best animal husbandry practices and conservation protocols.

###