THREATS TO BATS

Bat populations are threatened world-wide, facing habitat loss, a new devastating disease and industrial development, but the primary cause of their decline is wanton destruction by humans – usually because of myth and misinformation.

HABITAT LOSS

Bats face loss of roosting habitat, feeding habitat, clean water and air. This is due to destruction of old growth forests, vandalism and disturbance of cave and rock shelters (by careless explorers, guano miners, bush meat hunters and others), collapse and backfill of abandoned mines, and when bats are left with no better roosts then building and bridges they are often also displaced from these. Bats lose good water due to chemical and thermal pollution, water depletion and reduction of water diversity. Bats often suffer from loss of feeding habitat due to pesticides which poison the bats and reduce the insects bats eat, and from agriculture mono-cultures which provide insufficient diversity of prey. All of these reasons may require bats to increase their daily and/or seasonal travel, which exposes them to more predators, stress, exhaustion, collisions with structures, and fatality from wind turbines.

WHITE-NOSE SYNDROME

WNS is a disease of hibernating bats which is causing the most precipitous decline of North American wildlife in the past century. Since it first appeared in 2006, it has killed and estimated 5.7 – 6.7 million bats. Nearly 100 percent of bats have died at some sites and WNS threatens to devastate bat populations across the continent. Visit batcon.org/WNS for more information.

Which bats are being affected? Six bat species have been affected by WNS so far and another three species have been detected with the fungus that causes WNS. 25 species of hibernating bats in the U.S. could decline, and WNS could threaten some previously common species with extinction.

How fast is it spreading? WNS, first detected in New York in February 2006, has spread rapidly throughout the eastern United States. In 2011, it spread 450 miles in a single winter. WNS, or the fungus that causes it, is now documented in 19 U.S. states and 4 Canadian provinces.

How soon will bat populations recover? Bats are long-lived but slow-reproducing mammals. Life spans of 20 years or more are typical for North American bat species and most give birth to only one pup each year. Where WNS has killed large numbers, it is unlikely that bat populations will recover to pre-WNS levels in our lifetime, if ever.

Year of the Bat Article – Threat to Bats
How does WNS kill bats? Hibernating bats affected by WNS are characterized by some or all of these symptoms: 1) a white fungus that grows on the nose, ears and wing membranes; 2) depleted fat reserves due to increased winter arousals long before bats normally emerge from hibernation in the spring; 3) a compromised immune response during hibernation; 4) damage or scarring of the wings; and 5) abnormal bat behavior (for example, bats emerge too soon from hibernation and are seen flying in midwinter, which usually means they will freeze or starve to death).

BATS & WIND ENERGY

Amid heightened concerns about climate change and the economic and environmental costs of fossil fuels, wind has become an increasingly popular source of energy. Wind-generated electricity is renewable and generally considered environmentally clean, but wind-energy facilities often take an alarming toll on wildlife. Widespread fatalities of birds and bats have been documented. Wind-energy sites, especially those on ridge tops in the eastern United States, are causing unexpectedly high bat fatalities, giving new urgency to the scientific search for solutions. As many as a quarter of a million bats may be killed each year. Visit batcon.org/wind for more information.

PERSECUTION BY HUMANS

Despite the great benefits which bats provide to humans, they are still among the most persecuted animals on earth. Every year there are new reports, even from the US, of hundreds, even thousands of bats killed needlessly in caves and mines. Conservation education and research, through organizations like AZA, are the best hope for bats as well as the ecosystems and humans that depend on bats. Visit batcon.org for more information.