



'Year of the Bat' gives wings to world's only flying mammals

Special focus on European species and biodiversity benefits

Prague (Czech Republic), 22 September 2010 – They save the farming industry millions of dollars each year, help sustain the world's forests and, in some countries, are a major tourist attraction. Bats – described as 'one of the planet's most misunderstood and persecuted mammals' – are now flying out of the night and into the spotlight for a two-year-long celebration.

Launching today, the UNEP-backed 'Year of the Bat' will promote conservation, research and education on the world's only flying mammals. There will be a special focus on the ecological benefits that bats provide, such as pest control and seed dispersal.

The joint campaign, led by the UN's Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) and the Agreement on the Conservation of Populations of European Bats (EUROBATS), will draw attention to the world's 1100 bat species – around half of which are currently at risk.

"Compared to animals like tigers and elephants, bats receive little positive attention," said Andreas Streit, Executive Secretary of EUROBATS. "But they are fascinating mammals and play an indispensable role in maintaining our environment."

From insect-eating bats in Europe that provide important pest control to seed-dispersing bats in the tropics that help sustain rainforests, bats deliver vital ecosystem services across a wide range of environments.

Bat populations in large urban areas can consume up to 30,000 pounds of insects in a single night.

One of most spectacular and unusual tourist attractions in Austin, Texas is the Congress Bridge bat flight from mid-March until November, where over a million Mexican free-tailed bats stream into the sky at dusk on their nightly forage for food. A popular tourist attraction, the spectacular bat flight generates millions of dollars for the city each year.

"When migrating, bats can travel up to 4,000 kilometres in one year," said Elizabeth Mrema, Executive Secretary of CMS. "Africa's greatest mammal migration involves 8 million fruit bats that fly into Zambia from across the continent each year. This flight is an incredible spectacle that scientists are still unravelling."

Besides the Arctic, Antarctic and a few isolated oceanic regions, bats are found everywhere on Earth. Having inhabited the planet for the last 50 million years, bats today make up nearly a quarter of the global mammal population.

More than 1,100 bat species now documented but bat species are still being discovered in places as varied as Madagascar, the United Kingdom, the Philippines, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Comoros islands.

The Year of the Bat in 2011 will coincide with the United Nations' International Year of Forests. Bat species disperse seeds and aid pollination in temperate and tropical forests, helping to regenerate and sustain almost a third of the Earth's land area. Sustainable forestry management is essential for maintaining healthy bat populations as well as balanced ecosystems in forests and woodland areas.

Bat populations have declined alarmingly in recent decades. Despite intensified conservation efforts, over half of all bats species are now classified by the International Union for Conservation as threatened or near threatened. Habitat loss and destruction, human disturbance at hibernation sites, increasing urbanisation and epidemics such as White-nose Syndrome – which has killed

more than half a million bats in the United States since 2006 – are putting bats increasingly in danger.

Bat species throughout the world need continued protection. Most people are unaware that bats provide invaluable services to the environment. Fruit agriculture, central to tropical economies, depends to a large extent on the ecological contributions of fruit bats. An estimated 134 plants that yield products used by humans are partially or entirely reliant on bats for seed dispersal or pollination.

The honorary ambassador for the Year of the Bat is Dr. Merlin Tuttle, a leading ecologist and wildlife photographer and founder of Bat Conservation International.

“Bats rank among our planet’s most misunderstood and intensely persecuted mammals because they are active only at night and difficult to observe and understand”, says Dr. Tuttle. “Many bats are the primary predators of insects that fly at night, for example, including those that cost farmers and foresters billions of dollars in losses annually. When these bat populations decline, demands for dangerous pesticides grow, as does the cost of growing essential crops like rice, corn and cotton.”

As the Year of the Bat campaign brings these issues into focus in 2011, EUROBATS will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Agreement on the Conservation of Populations of European Bats. A newly-adopted extension of the Agreement will expand EUROBATS’ influence to 53 species and 62 countries in addition to the European Union. This will cover 14 new countries in Northern Africa and the Middle East.

New research announced at the EUROBATS conference held in Prague on 20 – 22 September has shown that bat species in Europe are the only species to have met the United Nations’ 2010 targets for achieving a significant reduction in the rate of ecosystem and species loss. Yet this success does not eliminate the need for bat conservation and awareness-raising.

Many governments and organisations have already indicated their enthusiasm to participate in the Year of the Bat, including European countries ranging from Azerbaijan to the UK, as well as the United States and Cuba. The World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) has also agreed to be a partner for the campaign.

Environmental experts increasingly regard bats as indicators of biodiversity and healthy ecosystems. With biodiversity as an integral part of the campaign, the Year of the Bat will encourage people across the world to get involved in bat conservation efforts, so that these fascinating “masters of the night sky” can continue to delight us and perform their invaluable services to the global environment.

Notes to Editors

The Agreement on the Conservation of Populations of European Bats (**EUROBATS**), a binding international treaty which came into force in 1994, presently numbers 32 European states among its Parties and counts 62 range states plus the European Union within its territory. The Agreement was concluded under the auspices of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), which recognises that endangered migratory species can be properly protected only if activities are carried out over the entire migratory range of the species. EUROBATS aims to protect all 53 species of bats identified in Europe, through legislation, education, conservation measures and international co-operation with Agreement members and with countries which have not yet joined. (www.eurobats.org)

The Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (**CMS**), also known as the Bonn Convention, works for the conservation of a wide array of endangered migratory animals worldwide through the negotiation and implementation of agreements and species action plans. At present, 114 countries are parties to the convention. (www.cms.int)

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