

Saving Bats around the Globe: Ecology as Activism

by CHRIS WOODRUFF

I DOUBT I WILL EVER FORGET THAT sweltering morning in August 2007 when I arrived at Sid Richardson Hall to meet the rest of the incoming class of LLILAS graduate students. This was one of the most anxious days of my life. Sweat was beading on my forehead and my palms were dripping—not because it was already 95 degrees at 8:30 in the morning and not because I was hurriedly introduced to the crowd of professors and students gathered under the oak trees drinking coffee and eating donuts—but because I was terrified that at any moment the time would come for all of us to don burnt orange t-shirts for a group photo. As a recent graduate and thoroughly brainwashed product of Texas A&M University, nothing scared me more. Today, I look back on that morning and smile. Much to my relief, the burnt orange shirts never appeared, and more important, I now realize that a process of self-reflection and professional formation began that day, propelling me on my current trajectory.

Like many of my fellow alumni, I came to Austin with a well-defined set of academic goals and plans for the pursuit of relatively specific interests related to Latin America. To me, studying the volatile period of Uruguay's history, from the 1960s to the 1980s, was and is absolutely intriguing. I find great value in understanding the forces that led one of South America's most stable democracies into a torturous "dirty war," and this fascination steered me toward an interdisciplinary focus on human rights. Apart from the obvious lure of the Benson Collection, I was most attracted to UT by its offering of courses that would allow me to explore the intersections of historical inquiry with human rights advocacy.

Despite such a keen sense of academic aspirations, I suspect I was not alone among my peers in my lack of certainty regarding what career awaited me after graduation. Of course, many come to LLILAS intent on pursuing a PhD followed by a career in academia, but that particular path is not for everyone, and I knew fairly early on that I

would be seeking employment beyond the university. What I did not know (and never would have dreamed) was that rather than protecting human rights, I would soon be employed by an organization whose mission is to protect the world's most persecuted and undervalued *animal*—the bat.

There are still days when I ask myself how I wound up working for Bat Conservation International (BCI) following the completion of liberal arts degrees at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, neither of which included courses in biology or animal science. In answer to this question, I first remind myself that I was extremely fortunate to find a job in a timely manner given the current economy, period! Furthermore, I remember being attracted to BCI for its international exposure and for the opportunity that it presented to get my foot in the door at an established nonprofit organization advocating for a cause in which I could believe. The job posting at BCI was for a Grants and Contracts Assistant, and while I possessed no previous experience in this field, I decided to apply—thinking my regional expertise, language fluencies, and writing skills could be valuable assets for the organization. Thankfully, this turned out to be true, as I was able to convince BCI that I was the right man for the job.

Since being hired in August 2009, I have developed an even greater appreciation for the skill sets that I honed while studying at LLILAS. Daily, I am asked to conduct research in scholarly journals, organize



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and synthesize data, network with representatives of private foundations and government agencies, provide translation services when dealing with partners in Latin America, and produce polished writing under tight deadlines. There are so many workplaces in desperate need of employees with these abilities, and once proven, there is great potential for professional advancement. I found this out firsthand, when I was promoted from an entry-level position to one of much greater responsibility after only seven months on the job. For this, I give an enormous amount of credit to those professors who skillfully brought the “real world” into the classroom, sparking invaluable opportunities for personal and professional development.

By far, the most common question I receive from family and friends goes something like this: “How does a master’s degree in Latin American studies lead to a job in bat conservation?” To answer in part, nothing in my degree plan led me to work on behalf of bats. Even with Austin boasting the world’s largest urban bat colony—the bats living under the Congress Avenue Bridge—I never felt a particular calling to raise money or to advocate for their protection. This all changed, however, upon my hire at BCI, due in large part to the increased awareness I gained during my first weeks on the job regarding just how valuable and truly indispensable bats are to the maintenance of healthy ecosystems and human economies. My crash course in “Bats 101” revealed two things: (1) how ignorant I was about such a critical member of our ecosystem, and (2) that a small amount of education can be extremely powerful in transforming opinions and priorities. To me, this gets at the essence of advocacy work—the kind of work

I had hoped to one day be involved in after training under professors like Ariel Dulitzky. My job provides a platform from which to draft grant proposals for conservation projects around the globe. In the process, I have the power to affect the opinions and priorities of funders through writing informative proposals that include such information as the beneficial services provided by the bats living in a particular country or region. One common point we try to get across to funders who might otherwise restrict their dollars to work in the United States is that conserving migratory bat species during their stay in Arizona, for example, is meaningless unless we pay equal attention to the conservation issues affecting them while wintering in Mexico (I am sure the broad application of this logic will not be lost on those of us involved in the national immigration debate). Our on-the-ground work may or may not proceed, depending on the funder’s decision, but one thing is for sure: unless we educate the funders and other local decision-makers, nothing our scientists do in a cave or at another bat roosting site will make a bit of difference over the long term.

In the second part of my answer to those who ask me where the

connection lies between the study of human rights in Latin America and working for a nonprofit organization focused on bat conservation, I point out the many parallels I find between these two seemingly disparate pursuits. The easiest point to make is that bats are not only prevalent in Latin America, but, as a region, there are more bat species found from the Rio Grande to Tierra del Fuego than anywhere else in the world. Second, I can pique almost anyone’s interest by explaining that without bats, there would likely be no tequila—as research has shown that bats are the primary pollinator of wild agave. On a more serious note, I like to relate working for BCI in Austin to advocating for human rights in the United States. Due to its large size and apparent well-being, the colony of Mexican free-tail bats living under the Congress Avenue Bridge can easily give off the impression to Austinites that bats are thriving, and there are no causes for concern. Similarly, I believe the average American citizen sees no cause for concern

regarding the protection of human rights in this country. On the surface, no great travesty is taking place, and for many, the prospect of government action to ensure basic rights for all persons is looked at with a degree of apathy. Unless one is paying especially close attention, it is far too easy to be lulled to sleep by a false sense of well-being, and that applies for both bats and human rights. Through my work at BCI, I have the opportunity to at least attempt to prevent such apathy from persisting over the plight of bats. The important point that I hope to make to those who ask, therefore, is that advocacy work knows no geographical or species-oriented boundaries, just as the benefits of a degree from an area studies institute like LLILAS cannot

be constrained by the type of industry or professional activity in which one is employed. To be honest, I do not foresee myself having a long-lasting career working on behalf of bats, but the nonprofit training and advocacy experience I am gaining will forever be valuable to me no matter where I choose to apply them.

In writing this article, I realize that my interests and experiences represent only a small degree of the immense diversity among students, faculty, and staff who have called LLILAS home at some point in the last seventy years. For most of you, a love of winged mammals probably does not await you in your future. What I hope and expect does await all of us, however, is a life spent tirelessly pursuing the issues and topics that stir up our deepest passions and curiosities. I suspect these are the very issues that brought us together at LLILAS, and they will be the same topics that will keep us bonded no matter the direction our lives take us.

Chris Woodruff graduated from LLILAS with a master’s in Latin American Studies in 2009. 🌟

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