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Vampire bat debate: To kill or not to kill

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by Chris Kraul

TONSI, Panama-- Cattleman Francisco Oliva was on a round-up--of vampire bats. After a swarm of the blood-slurping creatures dive-bombed his herd and drank their fill one recent night, he corralled several dozen of them in special contraptions that look like giant badminton nets. He put each bat in a cage and then applied a poison called vampirin to their backs with a brush before releasing them. Back in the bat roost, the animals would be groomed by about 20 other bats, causing their deaths.

Here in the remote and hilly southwest corner of Panama, Oliva and other cattlemen wage a continual battle against a variety of livestock pests such as coyotes, crocodiles, ticks, worms, and a host of tropical diseases. But he has been driven to the edge of desperation by the increasing bat attacks.

Surveying his cattle, most of Oliva's 300-head herd bore fang markings and red stains from the nightly bloodletting. During the month of April, Oliva said, he lost 10 calves to anemia caused by successive bloodlettings. He and other cattlemen bemoan the scarcity of the bat-catching nets, which are strictly controlled by the Panamanian government to prevent their use to capture endangered birds.

Oliva said adult vampire bats, which have a wingspan of 8 inches, swoop down by the hundreds over his herd, land on the ground and then jump up on the animals' legs, underbellies or faces to bite them. A bat's saliva contains an anticoagulant that makes blood flow freely, and the bat laps up the blood. Oliva said he would exterminate every bat if he could.

Stefan Klose, a research zoologist, begged to differ. He not only stuck up for vampire bats but described the animals as boons to humanity. Bat-based research led to the development of sonar and anti-coagulant medicines that prevent heart attacks, and scientists are only beginning to understand the creatures. "Very little of what we have invented has been made from scratch. Nature usually provides the template. Vampires could hold the key to a problem we want to solve, like AIDS or cancer. But if you destroy them, they are lost for eternity.

Klose also confessed a fondness for the creatures. The scientist said feeding time, when the bats accept bits of banana from his hand, is a "really sweet and peaceful sight. It always reminds me of how close these animals are to us and how incredibly intelligent they are--certainly more exotic and wilder than my neighbor's dog, but no less smart or cuddly." In addition, Panama's bat population plays an important role in pollination and insect control.

Panama has 120 bat species and bats are found globally except in Antarctica. Non-vampire bats make up the majority of the 1,100 known bat species. There are only three bloodsucking, or vampire, species of bats.

Vampire bats have always been present in Panama, and their attacks have ebbed and flowed. But now the attacks have become more frequent. Scientists theorize that the increased attacks on livestock are due to timber cutting that has flushed bats out of food-rich forests to the cattle herds, a ready-made and usually stationary food supply for the bats.