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Local View: Collaboration is needed to protect bats and have responsible forest management

By **Mark Jacobs** on Jun 25, 2014 at 9:59 p.m.

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I've always admired forest bats, their voracious appetite for insects, and the echolocation and aerial acrobatics they use to catch those insects. But they also creep me out a bit on the rare occasion when they enter my home; there is the threat of rabies.

But recently I discovered that a study by the University of Calgary found that far less than 1 percent of forest bats carry rabies, and if you act responsibly, the threat of contracting rabies from bats is extremely small.

"Bats are rarely aggressive, even if they're being chased, but they may bite in self-defense if handled," Bat Conservation International reported.

"Only a small percentage of bats (about one-half of 1 percent overall) have

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rabies, but anyone bitten by a bat should immediately seek medical consultation.”

So, 99.5 percent of bats don't carry rabies. It's good to know we have little to fear from forest bats.

However, there is growing anxiety regarding a particular forest-dwelling bat. The northern long-eared bat is being proposed as federally endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service per the Endangered Species Act. The primary reason for the potential listing is white nose syndrome, a fungal disease decimating long-eared bat populations in eastern states.

Based on interim documents and the experience in other states with the endangered Indiana bat, significant restrictions on forest management could be imposed here, especially in midsummer when forest bats are roosting in trees. These restrictions would have negative

effects on our northern forest-dependent communities, as the forest industry can't operate just half of the year. Adding confusion is that there is no indication responsible forest management has caused negative effects to forest bats.

The primary areas of concern related to the impacts on forest management appear to be direct bat mortality from timber-harvest activity in summer and the loss of habitat due to clear cutting.

Minnesota has more than 17 million acres of forestland, and if timber-harvest rates were at the maximum sustainable rate (about 5.5 million cords per year), about

1.5 percent of the forest would be affected annually. Due to our vast wetlands, less than half of that harvest would occur in summer. But the reality is that in

the past five years the harvested amount has been about one-half of that volume each year, meaning that more than 99.5 percent of the forest is not affected each summer. The odds of bat mortality from timber harvesting are very small. But that small fraction amounts to nearly 1 million cords and many millions of dollars in economic impact each year.

As our forests age, there are more acres becoming suitable as bat habitat than being lost to intensive harvesting or clearing. Minnesota's forest-management guidelines recommend retaining habitat features such as dead standing "snag" trees, clumps of live trees and cavity trees, as they are important for a number of wildlife species, including the northern long-eared bat. Forestry audits indicate a very high level of compliance relative to wildlife tree retention. So even after harvest there are features that make most clear-cut sites suitable for roosting bats.

Just as we have little to fear from forest bats, they have little to fear from forest management; in fact, the diverse forests created by responsible forestry practices have

resulted in many millions of acres of bat habitat in our northern forests. Typically, habitat management is the approach used to maintain healthy and viable wildlife populations; but it doesn't seem to be a consideration regarding this proposed Endangered Species Act listing. Land managers and loggers are unfairly portrayed as being part of the problem and not part of a solution.

I'd suggest that the Fish and Wildlife Service take a collaborative approach in our habitat-rich region by empowering land managers to continue maintaining forest bat habitat via responsible forest-

management practices. Loggers would have the duty of completing these plans on the ground. I believe land managers, loggers and conservationists

could rally around the charge of keeping our local bat populations thriving through forest-habitat management. This would allow the limited resources of the Fish and Wildlife Service to focus on stopping the real threat to the northern long-eared bat: white nose syndrome.

If successful, this approach would be a win-win for northern long-eared bats and for our local economy; and perhaps our local healthy bat population eventually could repopulate the rest of the nation.

I realize this thought is a bit naïve. The likely scenario is that limitations to timber harvesting will cause economic hardships; the northern long-eared bat will be demonized as the cause of the problem; and loggers, biologists and conservationists will be at odds: conflict instead of collaboration. It would not be the bat's fault or the fault of Fish and Wildlife biologists. Blame would belong to the one-size-fits-all inflexibility of the Endangered Species Act.

The sad reality is restrictions to forest management designed to protect individual bats would cause more economic harm to our local forest-dependent communities than the protection it would provide to northern long-eared bat populations.

It seems like we should have learned lessons from the ill-fated conflicts regarding the spotted owl in the West. Will our experience be “same story/different place” or can we join together to protect the northern long-eared bat and our forest-based economy?

Mark Jacobs of McGregor is the Aitkin County land commissioner responsible for managing 223,000 acres of public lands certified as “well-managed” since 1997 by the U.S. Forest Stewardship Council.

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