

Vampires Prey on Panama

By Chris Kraul, Tribune Newspapers: *Los Angeles Times*

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TONOSI, 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. Or so Oliva hoped.

“We have to look for answers, because this little animal is very stubborn,” Oliva said days after the capture, surveying his 300-head herd, most of them bearing bat-fang markings and red stains from the nightly bloodletting. Oliva said he would exterminate every bat if he could.

Stefan Klose begged to differ. He not only stuck up for the common vampire bat, 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, he pointed out, and scientists are only beginning to understand the creatures.

“I certainly defend vampire bats’ right to a place in the ecosystem,” said Klose, a young German zoologist. People’s irrational reaction to vampires, he said, reflects “our primal fear of being someone else’s food object.”

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.”

Few animals inspire the repugnance and fascination of vampire bats, and perhaps nowhere are opinions more divided than in Panama.

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Bats thrive in the tropical rain forests that cover much of Panama because of a plenitude of animal and plant foods, abundant shelter and the lack of seasons to inhibit regeneration.

“Bats have developed a radar system that can distinguish the tiniest insect in the middle of dense bush in the dead of night,” said Todd Capson, a Smithsonian staff scientist who tracks the development of technology derived from tropical flora and fauna. “It’s inconceivable there isn’t something more to learn from that.”

Rancher Oliva can be forgiven for feeling antagonistic. Here in the remote and hilly southwest corner of Panama, he 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. During the month of April, Oliva said, he lost 10 calves to anemia caused by successive bloodlettings.

While sympathizing with the cattlemen, Klose says further study of bats might yield more technological breakthroughs. “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.”