

Diseased Bats Mean Caving a No-Go

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HARRISONBURG, Va. — Living in the idyllic beauty of the Shenandoah Valley, outdoor activities are a given. However, one of these pastimes has recently been eliminated from the list.

For more than a month, JMU's caving club has aborted its trips as a prevention method for the spread of White-Nose Syndrome (WNS).

For the last three years, WNS, a condition with an unknown origin, has killed hundreds of thousands of bats in caves across northeastern parts of the United States. The disease was first identified in several caves near Albany, N.Y., in February 2006 and has since spread down the East coast, recently entering West Virginia.

Drops in bat population, such as those in New York's Gages Cave, deeply concern the caving community.

"It's really sad that the bats are dying," said junior Christina Ruiz, vice president of the Madison Union Student Grotto, JMU's caving club. "Most cavers are environmentalists, so you don't want to see that and know you're the cause."

Though bats are the primary vector for WNS, the concern in caving communities across the country is that human activity in caves and mines may be aiding the spread of this condition. Possible transport devices may include boots and caving gear.

The National Speleological Society, a "not for profit organization dedicated to the study, conservation, exploration and knowledge of caves," according to its Web site, states that there are "nearly 30 infected sites in at least four states identified since the winter of 2006-2007."

Gages Cave, located near Albany, had a record of 968 bats in 1985. However, after being infected by WNS for two years, it reported a total of 95 bats in March of 2008 and a year later only 56 remained.

Ruiz is not satisfied with the current efforts to battle this problematic disease.

"Not enough is being done by the government and environmental agencies," Ruiz said. "They're just limiting caving and not putting enough money or research into finding the source. We wish more could be done."

Stephanie Searles, the operations manager for the National Speleological Society, disagrees with Ruiz's sentiment.

"We have created the WNS Rapid Response Fund which has already raised over \$35,000 in donations," Searles said. "With this money we have provided grants to Boston University, Missouri State University, Northern Kentucky University and the Northeastern Cave Conservancy for WNS research. So, in my opinion, we are doing quite a bit to fix this issue."

Said Ruiz: "I know the National Speleological Society is a smaller organization and can only provide so much funding. I just wish the larger government organizations would show as much dedication to this case as the society."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that more than 400,000 bats have died from WNS, this includes 25,000 that were already federally endangered. The service has recommended various precautionary

measures to stop the spread of WNS. These steps include ceasing all caving activity and using new and

clean tools and gear in caves.

To combat the spread of WNS, Ruiz said, "We [MUSG] try to decontaminate our gear and educate members about proper cleaning, but the biggest thing we're doing is simply not caving."

Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries has implemented a voluntary moratorium on caves until the issue can be sorted out.

UREC, which plans basic level caving trips, chose to abide by the VDGIF's wishes.

"Even though it's a voluntary ban, we feel like it's important to make a statement to support the habitats and potential habitats of bats," said Sue Lowley, UREC's adventure program coordinator.

The National Wildlife Health Center has been working hard to locate the cause of this disease by using bat muzzles to obtain samples of fungus for research. However, until then, caving groups around the country will take extra precautions to ensure this condition won't spread.

Though MUSG has tried to provide other outdoor activities like hiking, they have seen a definite decline in membership.

"It's hard to get people to come to meetings for a caving club, when you're just not caving," Ruiz said.

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