

A brief history of the Czech Bat Conservation Trust

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Abstract. The Czech Bat Conservation Trust (CBCT) held its inaugural meeting on 13 December 1991 in Prague. It associates professional and amateur chiropterologists, currently 120 persons. Since 1993, CBCT has been collaborating with its sister organization in Slovakia, the Slovak Bat Conservation Society. According to its statutes, CBCT's main mission is to coordinate the conservation of and research on bats and their environment in the Czech Republic. Various aspects of CBCT's activities are described and discussed in the present paper, among them the organization of long-term monitoring of bat populations, the program of and attendance at annual European Bat Nights, and the protection of bats roosting in buildings. Current legislation on bat protection in Europe and the Czech Republic is mentioned as well.

Bats, trust founding, research and protection, Czech Republic

Introduction

In this paper we do not try to analyse the history of legal protection of bats in the former Czechoslovakia and the present Czech Republic. The object of this contribution is to deal with both professional and amateur researchers' interest in bats resulting in the need for coordination of long-term monitoring and other research projects with conservation measures. In 1991, that interest resulted in the establishment of the Czech Bat Conservation Trust, or CBCT (Česká společnost pro ochranu netopýrů, or ČESON). This is to correct a note in the book by Horáček & Uhrin (2010) that CBCT originally was a Czechoslovak organization and therefore its title was Czechoslovak Bat Conservation Trust. No such label ever existed, although several colleagues from Slovakia are members of CBCT. After Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993, the Slovak Bat Conservation Society, or SBCS (Spoločnosť pre ochranu netopierov na Slovensku, or SON) was founded and, since then, the two non-profit organizations have been closely collaborating. Co-editing of the present journal *Vespertilio* by CBCT and SBCS has been one of the results of this collaboration. In addition to the primary subjects of this paper, the history and activities of CBCT, present legislation on bat conservation in Europe and the Czech Republic will also be mentioned.

The years 1991–2000

In the Bohemian Lands, interest in bats other than that based on superstitious fancies about them, was aroused as early as in the second half of the 19th century by the work of the great naturalist F. A. Kolenati. However, it was not until the second half of the 20th century, i.e. about one hundred years later, that the increasing interest in the study of bats attracted several zoologists, their students and also amateur naturalists (Hanák & Gaisler 2008, 2010). As the number of mainly young chiropterologists grew, the idea to establish a kind of organization focused on bats became more

and more evident. A great inspiration came from the USA where Merlin Tuttle founded the Bat Conservation International (BCI) in 1982. Although BCI's seat is in Austin, Texas, its mission is to conserve bats and their ecosystems worldwide. This is reflected, among other facts, in the composition of BCI's Scientific Advisory Board, the present Science Advisory Committee. The second author of this paper has been one of its members since 1987. Other stimuli came from Europe where national non-profit organizations were formed to monitor and protect bat populations, among them the UK Bat Conservation Trust (BCT) in 1990. Perhaps that was the direct impulse to us in the Czech Republic, the more so because we had close scientific and personal contacts with our British colleagues, in particular with BCT officers Paul A. Racey (chairman), Robert E. Stebbings (vice-chairman) and Tony Hutson (editor of *Bat News*). Furthermore, cooperation with colleagues and institutes studying and protecting bats in other countries was significantly facilitated by the collapse of the communist regime in November 1989.

After preliminary negotiations, the Czech Bat Conservation Trust (CBCT) held its inaugural meeting on 13 December 1991 in the National Museum in Prague, with the approval of the Ministry of Environment of the Czech Republic and the Society of the National Museum. However, to this day CBCT has been a politically independent non-governmental organization. Officers were elected at the first meeting, among them Jiří Gaisler (president), Jaroslav Červený (vice-president) and Vladimír Hanzal (secretary).

We asked Vladimír Hanák, the doyen of modern bat research in Czechoslovakia (although he was a young man at that time), to be CBCT's honorary member, but he refused. Nevertheless, Vladimír Hanák together with Miloš Anděra, Ivan Horáček, Miroslav Kovařík, Martin Průcha, Jan Zukal and several other colleagues were elected, and agreed to be, CBCT officers. Although most of them were zoologists by education, it was declared that membership was not restricted to professional biologists or nature conservationists, and amateur friends of bats were welcome, too. The number of people attending the first session of CBCT was not recorded, but in the years 1991–1995 CBCT had about 50 members, and their number increased to nearly 120 in 2005–2010 (Fig. 1). Since the first gathering, CBCT members have been meeting every year to discuss topics of common interest, and every 5th year to elect a new presidium.

The statutes and activities of CBCT were discussed during the first session. Suggestions included a seminar on bat detecting, field workshop with mist netting, publishing of a bulletin (*CBCT Newsletter*), listing of important bat hibernacula, distribution of bat bands, and organization of a census of bats hibernating underground. Such census had been made before the creation of CBCT, but a new challenge arose to improve it and enlarge its scale. Draft statutes were submitted to the Ministry of Interior. The statutes valid at present were approved, after certain modifications, on 29 April 2006. According to them, CBCT's main mission is to coordinate the conservation of and research on bats and their environment.

Issues Nos. 1–9 of the *CBCT Newsletter* were published in the years 1992–1999. J. Zukal was the chief editor, alternatively assisted by H. Berková, J. Gaisler, V. Hanzal, I. Kožená, M. Pokorný, M. Uhrin and J. Zima. The topics included the results of bat census in underground hibernacula in the Czech Republic (also in Slovakia in 1994–1996) and various short papers such as information on workshops and symposia, European bat names, results of bat banding, estimation of age in bats, rabies in bats, faunistic records, noctules roosting in new housing estates, partial albinism in bats, what's new in bat protection in Europe, conservation of bats in protected landscape areas, etc.

After 1999, the function of newsletter was taken over by the regular journal *Vespertilio*, No. 1 of which appeared in 1995 under the title *Netopiere* (Bats, in Slovak). In addition to the newsletter and the journal, annual reports were published separately in some years.

The Issue No. 1 of *Eurobat Chat*, a newsletter promoting the European Bats Agreement (Eurobats), was published in November 1992. The first paragraph of the newsletter reads as follows: “Eurobat Chat is designed to encourage dialogue between European governments committed to bat conservation.” At a meeting of the Parties to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (Bonn Convention) in October 1985 a resolution was passed to develop an Agreement for European species of Microchiroptera. The Agreement on the Conservation of Populations of European Bats was formally signed by the first five countries in London on 4 December 1991. The Czech Republic signed the Agreement on 24 February 1994. In Issue No. 7, it was reported that the Eurobats Secretariat had been established in Bonn, Germany and, in Issue No. 8, the European Bat Night was introduced. The idea had first come from Poland’s International Bat Night in 1995. The 1st European Bat Night, together with the 3rd International Bat Night in Poland, took place in 1997. Thanks to CBCT members, the Czech Republic has been participating in the organization of European Bat Night (Evropská noc pro netopýry, or EBN) since 1997. It takes place at the end of August or the beginning of September, is organized by bat specialists and attended by the general public including many children. For instance, in 1998, EBN took place in Brno (250 participants), Mikulov (50) and Liberec (45). In addition to that, 7 CBCT experts participated in the EBN at Nová Sedlica, Slovakia. The programs of the individual EBNs differ depending on local facilities and can include bat detecting, mist netting, lectures, presentations, etc. Particularly attractive are lectures with presentations inside caves, alternated with demonstrations of live bats. All captured bats are determined to species, sex and approximate age, weighed, banded, and released. Information is given concerning their life, endangerment and protection. Since most of the bat nights are scheduled from the time shortly before sunset until midnight, there is time enough for questions and answers concerning various aspects of the life and conservation of bats.

Brief information on the activity of CBCT during the first years of its existence will be concluded by pointing at the protection of bats in the Czech Republic by law. This is assured by the. Decree

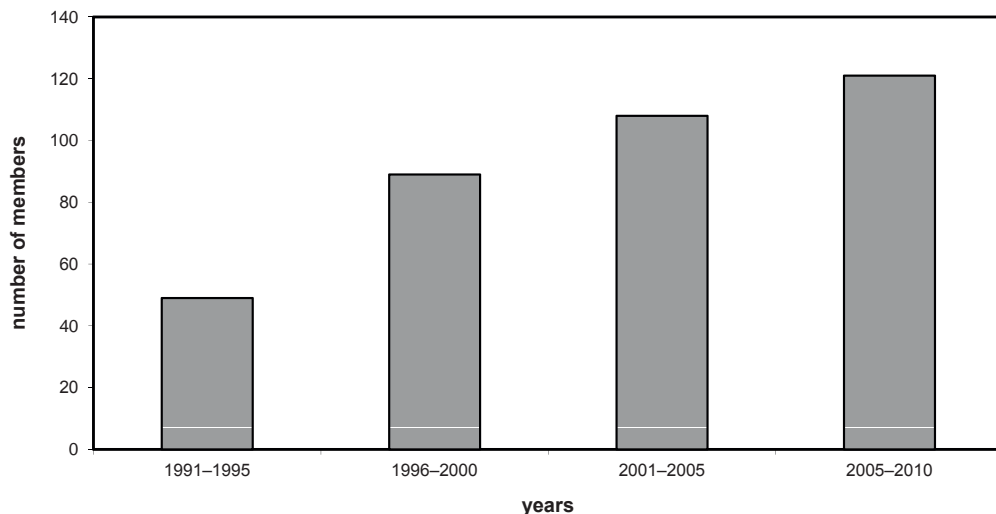


Fig. 1. The number of members of CBCT in 1991-2010.

No. 395 of the Ministry of the Environment of 11 June 1992, implementing selected provisions of Czech National Council Act No. 114/1992 Coll. on the protection of the environment and the natural landscape. In the Annex No III of the decree, particularly protected bat species are listed. The need to implement European legislation concerning bats arose after the Czech Republic signed the Agreement on the Conservation of Populations of European Bats in 1994 and, irrespectively of that, after it became one of European Union member states. The application of European legislation implied to novel the decree No. 395 (Amendment No. 175/2006), according to which all bat species living on the state territory are listed as critically endangered or endangered.

The years 2001–2012

The second decade has been characterized by an increase in financial support of CBCT activities (Fig. 2). The Trust has become a guarantor of the monitoring of bat populations in the territory of the Czech Republic, whose results are passed to the Agency for Nature Conservation and Landscape Protection as well as the Ministry of Environment. In the first half of the decade, the census mostly concerned hibernacula only. Its results were published in *Vespertilio* 5, 2001 (Czech Republic) and *Vespertilio* 6, 2002 (Slovakia). In 2001–2003, maternity colonies were included into the census, mainly of species roosting in buildings (*Myotis myotis*, *M. emarginatus*, *Rhinolophus hipposideros*). In 2004, regular yearly monitoring was launched including four methodological approaches: (1) visual census of hibernating bats, (2) revision of summer colonies, (3) netting in 9 localities characterized by a significant social activity of bats and (4) bat detecting in 10 regions. The census of hibernating bats has been carried out since 1969 in 15 model hibernacula, and new localities have been involved in the course of years. More than 1000 hibernacula were checked in the Czech Republic under CBCT's coordination of the program, and about 600 of them were monitored every year (Horáček 2010). Maternity colonies of 15 species were monitored in the years 2005–2009, the highest number of localities was checked in *Rhinolophus hipposideros*, *Myotis myotis*, *M. emarginatus* and *Nyctalus noctula* (Bartonička & Gaisler 2010). During the last five years, 150–180 shelters of maternity colonies were checked each year.

As a logical consequence of the monitoring, CBCT aims at protecting permanent bat shelters, especially important hibernacula and roosts of maternity colonies. The impact of real or potential disturbance on bats has yearly been assessed in each locality and, in cooperation with the Agency for Nature Conservation and Landscape Protection and the Ministry of Environment, a solution has been sought for protection of the respective sites. As regards underground hibernacula, traffic in months with cold weather (October – April) and inappropriate gating of entrances are among the most frequent negative factors. Concerning buildings with maternity colonies, rebuilding, reconstruction, insulation and similar kinds of work on roofs, walls, in lofts, etc. can have detrimental effects and result in disappearance or even death of the bats. About 10 buildings with bat colonies have been reconstructed every year. CBCT published two handbooks with model examples of how reconstruction work should be done to avoid disturbing bat colonies and prevent their disappearance (Viktora et al. 2008, Schnitzerová et al. 2009). Concerned are not only maternity but also temporary and, in some cases, hibernating colonies in buildings, in particular in prefabricated houses.

The negative impact is not limited to human interference with bat shelters but includes secondary effects such as restriction of foraging grounds or interruption of flyways and migration corridors. In 2004–2010, CBCT launched numerous studies elucidating, e.g., the effects of different forest ecosystems and their management, forest fragmentation and road traffic on bat populations and communities. In 2008–2010, methodic direction was launched to evaluate the impact of building

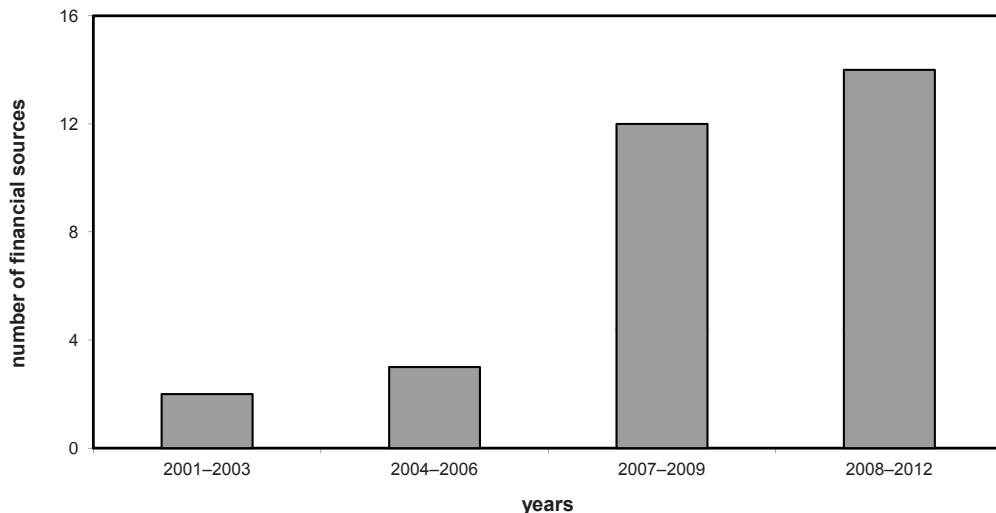


Fig. 2. The number of financial sources enabling CBCT to function in 2001–2012.

and running wind turbines on bats, including the mapping of sites in the Czech Republic where it is either acceptable or unacceptable to construct wind energy facilities.

Advertising the protection and conservation of bats has been one of the main objectives of CBCT since its foundation, yet new types of education and enlightenment seem necessary in the second decade of the Trust's existence, such as spreading general information about the life and endangerment of bats on various occasions (including European Bat Nights, EBN), lectures and workshops for students at schools, submitting information to construction firms and training designers and builders, and affording consultations concerning bats to anybody by e-mail and



Fig. 3. The plaque “Our Neighbour the Bat”, a symbol of consent to sharing the same building with bats. Thirty-nine such plaques have been awarded.

telephone. Increasing numbers of people took part in the 1998–2009 EBNs (Horáček et al. 2010), with the peak in 2011 when the EBN was held at 46 places in the Czech Republic and was attended by the total of 4,532 visitors apart from the organizers (Schnitzerová & Bartonička 2012). The growing sponsorship since 2007 (see Fig. 2) has enabled us to engage two employees instead of one, so that it is easier to meet the many tasks, some of which are mentioned above. At least 10 projects, aimed fully or in part at protecting bats roosting in buildings, have been realized or are under way. The new staff also keeps up better communication with the State Nature Conservancy and Ministry of Environment, prepares campaigns aimed at people and organizations really or potentially endangering bats, and carries out all activities focused on the general public. The staff also seeks out owners or managers of buildings (dwelling houses, castles, churches, and others) who protect bats and take measures to improve their sheltering. Such persons are awarded a commemorative plaque “Our Neighbour the Bat” (Fig. 3).

Although bats are no longer nailed to the doors of barns and other village houses, many people still hate their presence. Not only superstitions but facts may be the reason, such as pollution by bat droppings or loud vocalizations of bats, e.g. the noctules roosting in crevices of prefabricated houses. Some people are afraid of bats flying into the corridors of their houses or even into bedrooms, the more so if they come in groups as do the pipistrelles at the time of late summer „invasions“. Such situations occur from time immemorial, but CBCT members encounter them more often at present owing to the boom in communication via various media. To inform the clients by phone or e-mail is enough in some cases, in others it is necessary to visit the place, offer advice or handle the problem. The latter sometimes includes collecting bats roosting at unsuitable places and releasing them far from the site. Not always, however, are the bats able to fly away. CBCT, in collaboration with *Nyctalus*, a specialized Prague group, also provides care for injured or otherwise handicapped bats (for details see Jahelková et al. 2009). Recently there have been several hundred cases per year when CBCT staff and members are asked to help with problems involving bats.

The most important activities of the Czech Bat Conservation Trust are described in this paper. For more information please see www.ceson.org.

Acknowledgments

The authors are indebted to Alexandra Štysová for linguistic collaboration. They also thank Libuše Vlasáková from the Ministry of Environment of the Czech Republic for rectifying our translation of the nomenclature of legislation concerning bats.

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received on 20 April 2014