



February 20, 2021

Dear John,

Given your reputation for integrity and fearless candor, several of your loyal followers have asked me to help you better understand disease risks from bats. Why me? Because, as one of the world's most experienced bat researchers, I've handled hundreds of species worldwide for 60 years, often surrounded by millions in caves. I've also led successful conservation efforts internationally for more than 40 years. My experience and photographs are used worldwide, including in National Geographic articles, to share the truth about bats through my organization, Merlin Tuttle's Bat Conservation. Here's a clip from my [appearance on David Letterman](#) decades ago; I have been leading efforts to educate humans about bats my entire career.

I, and hundreds of others who study bats, have spent whole careers working with them unprotected against any of the so-called emerging diseases about which we're now warned. And we're still healthy. We're also aware that millions of people visit and work in caves annually without causing disease outbreaks.

Thus, we question the sanity of warnings of extreme risks to visitors of tour caves where a bat could purportedly cause a deadly pandemic by defecating on them. There is no proof that such an event has ever occurred. And warning of the possibility is like warning of death from a falling spacecraft, possible but extremely unlikely.

I appreciate your mention of the far greater risks from industrial meat production and your comments on the essential contributions of bats to a healthy planet, but this is not enough to cultivate understanding and put [risks in perspective](#). For the record, unlike rodents who are overpopulating due to loss of predators, bats are extraordinarily vulnerable to extinction and already in alarming decline.

Exaggerated fear is the greatest cause of human intolerance and killing of bats. Unfortunately, sensational speculation, linking them to scary diseases, sells headline media stories and large grants. Virus hunting, typically linked to bats, has been shown to be an ineffective means of pandemic prevention. However, because bats are the easiest mammals to sample, and have few defenders, they have become tempting victims. Your guest failed to mention that, for anyone who simply doesn't handle bats, the risk of contracting *any* disease from one is minuscule. In fact, millions of bats share cities with people from America to Africa and Australia without causing disease outbreaks. As our human population continues to expand, we inescapably must learn to live *in harmony* with nature.

Although [well intended](#), the following documented points are too often distorted or ignored in sensational media coverage. I'd be more than happy to assist you and your staff in balancing the story.

- Bats harbor no more viruses than other animals ¹.
- Claims of disease from bats are often based on poorly supported speculation ².
- Claims of 96% genomic similarity between viruses are meaningless and misleading ^{3,4}.
- Promises that can't be kept are misdirecting billions of dollars to virus hunting that is counterproductively biased toward bats and better spent on other health priorities ^{5,6,7}.
- Bats have an undeniable history of living with humans without causing disease outbreaks ⁸.
- There is a long history of lucrative, but exceptionally harmful, exploitation of disease exaggerations against bats ⁹.
- Fear of bats leads to intolerance and killing ^{9,10}.



- Asking people to conserve bats because they are beneficial, while failing to counter exaggerated fear, is unlikely to improve conservation success ¹⁰.
- Ebola was first speculated to come from fruit bats, then insectivorous bats, but more recently it was admitted that no source has been found despite extensive efforts ^{11, 12}.
- It cannot be stated strongly enough that Ebola, SARS, MERS, and SARS-CoV-2 have not been isolated from a bat despite frequent attempts.

Also, here's a recent video sponsored by the U.S. National Park Service about [putting bat fears in perspective](#). Thank you for your time, I hope to hear from you.

Kindly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Merlin".

Merlin Tuttle
Founder & Executive Director
Merlin Tuttle's Bat Conservation



Millions of visitors have safely viewed spectacular emergences of 1.5 million bats in Austin, Texas.



References

1. Mollentze, N. & Streicker, D. G. Viral zoonotic risk is homogenous among taxonomic orders of mammalian and avian reservoir hosts. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (2020) doi:10.1073/pnas.1919176117.
2. Wenzel, J. Origins of SARS-CoV-1 and SARS-CoV-2 are often poorly explored in leading publications. Cladistics cl.12425 (2020) doi:10.1111/cl.12425.
3. Mallapaty, S. Coronaviruses Closely Related to the Pandemic Discovered in Japan and Cambodia. Nature 588, 15-16 (2020).
4. Mikkelsen, T. S. et al. Initial sequence of the chimpanzee genome and comparison with the human genome. Nature 437, 69-87 (2005).
5. Holmes, E. C., Rambaut, A. & Andersen, K. G. Pandemics: Spend on surveillance, not prediction. Nature 558, 180-182 (2018).
6. Zhang, Y.-Z. & Holmes, E. C. A Genomic Perspective on the Origin and Emergence of SARS-CoV-2. Cell (2020) doi:10.1016/j.cell.2020.03.035.
7. Tuttle, M.D. A Viral Witch Hunt. Issues in Science and Technology. (2020) <https://issues.org/a-viral-witch-hunt-bats/>.
8. Taylor, M. Bats: An Illustrated Guide to All Species. (Smithsonian Books, 2018).
9. Tuttle, M. D. Fear of Bats and its Consequences. Journal of Bat Research & Conservation 10, (2017).
10. Lu, M. et al. Does public fear that bats spread COVID-19 jeopardize bat conservation? Biological Conservation 108952 (2021) doi:10.1016/j.biocon.2021.108952.
11. Marí Saéz, A. et al. Investigating the zoonotic origin of the West African Ebola epidemic. EMBO Molecular Medicine 7, 17-23. (2015) doi:10.15252/emmm.201404792
12. Kock, R.A. et al. Searching for the source of Ebola: the elusive factors driving its spillover into humans during the West African outbreak of 2013-2016. Revue Scientifique et Technique (2019) doi:10.20506/rst.issue.38.1.2937.