

SWAMPA GOES TO KINDERGARTEN TO HELP ITS SURVIVAL

UTILA TIMES, GREEN SECTION

Kindergarten kids all around the world are rarely quiet and attentive, especially on Utila [Utila, Honduras]. I was privileged to see one of these rare moments of ‘all eyes up front.’ The ‘lizard people,’ as the islanders called them, were showing the kids the ‘king of the iguanas’—the swamper.

The windows were closed and the temperature was rising, yet the kids were sitting silently, eyes wide and mouths open. A larger than life image of a male swamper was on the wall and a real live one was about to come out of a sack.

The ‘lizard people’ are a team, made up of locals, BICA, COHDEFOR, German & Dutch scientists and biology students from the University of Tegucigalpa. They have come together to study and help protect this unique swamp iguana that is only found on Utila.

The swamper is an endangered species, and it is these kids at kindergarten that have the most to gain from its protection and survival.

There was once a crocodile on Utila. No one will ever know if it was unique to Utila, as they were all killed about 40 years ago. Who knows what the effect has been on the lagoons and swamps where it once lived. One thing is for sure, everything in nature plays an important role in the survival of all the species and Utila is worse off in some way, as it is missing a part of the cycle of life.

Even if we don’t know how something fits into the big picture, it does have a part to play and we must respect it. Mother nature is happiest when everything is in balance.

Different plants and animals naturally fade out of existence, like the dinosaur, so why the big deal about an animal becoming extinct?

The reason for the alarm and the urgent need for action and protection is the rate that animals and plants are disappearing from the earth’s surface, never to be seen again. For millions of years species became extinct every century.

Now more than 1,000 different species of plants and animals become extinct each year.

We will never know where else the swamper once lived, but because of destruction to habitats and hunting, it is now only found on Utila. Information was first recorded on the swamper in 1898 and then again in 1960, and until last year no one knew if it still existed. The leader of the team, Gunther Köhler, was told when he arrived on Utila last year that there were two types of large iguana living on Utila—the highlander and the swamper. To Gunther’s delight, he was able to identify the swamper as the little known *Ctenosaura bakeri*.

Once man becomes aware of the swamper’s predicament and stops hunting it for a while, future generations of Utilians will be able to continue enjoying the fun of going out, once in a while, and catching an iguana for dinner. If we keep killing something simply because we can, eventually it simply won’t be here anymore, ever!

The swamper, from the information gathered by the team, is very low in numbers, with very few females over 3 years [in age]. They are at the point of sure extinction if hunting, especially in the mating and nesting season, continues. If it is halted for a few years they will grow in numbers and their survival will be assured.

Knowledge mixed with experience brings wisdom. The day at the kindergarten was exactly this. Students learned to tell the difference between males and females, why it is so important not to hunt the females when she has eggs, and they got a chance to touch and look at one up close.

Joshua Henderson summed it up best. “If we kill and eat the swamper, it will be just like the crocodile that lives here no more.” He’s hoping that all future generations will have the same opportunities to see and occasionally eat iguana, and that it is not something they only learn about in a book.

Who are the 'Lizard People'?

A team of 10 Germans and one Dutch scientist arrived on Utila April 6 to team up with locals, iguana hunters, conservation groups, authorities from COHDEFOR, biology students from the University of Tegucigalpa and the children of Utila to help protect a very special species of spiny-tailed iguana. It exists nowhere else in the world—the *Ctenosaura bakeri* or better known as the swamper.

The team is led by Gunther Köhler, a lover of reptiles and amphibians. Although young, he has dedicated the past 20 years studying them and the team really cares about ensuring the continued existence of all species and travel all over the world researching, educating, learning and most importantly, raising the awareness of the little-known reptile world. Of the 12 different species of spinetail recorded, Gunther discovered two of them.

In his quiet, yet confident voice, Gunther explained that he feels the swamper really is the king of the iguana family. "With his big spines, the swamper sits high on his throne in the tall trees above the swamp." The swamper is the only spiny-tailed iguana that lives in the swamp and is a lot more docile and slow moving than the more common highlander (*Ctenosaura similis*), that lives in more arid habitats.

The swamper, according to Gunther, is in danger of extinction if hunting continues at its current rate. The Dodo bird was clubbed to extinction because it was such easy prey. The swamper is also easy prey, especially when the females leave the swamp, where they are protected by camouflage, and go to the beaches to lay their eggs. Not only is the female killed, the future generations of swamper are also destroyed.

The team of scientists were on the island for a month and left with their goals fulfilled and more questions than when they arrived. They were out in the field every day, sludging through the swamp counting, marking, identifying, taking blood samples and recording information about this relatively undocumented reptile.

Nests were studied and recording devices were left behind to record information about the early



Ctenosaura bakeri. Photograph: Gunther Köhler

stages of the swamper's life cycle. "In order to protect an animal properly, you must understand everything about the species," explained Gunther. He will be joining the team when they return in July to study the hatchlings and they'll return again the following mating and nesting seasons.

In between swamp expeditions, they were going around the schools and local community sharing their knowledge and interest with all who wanted to listen.

The team employed the services of the iguana experts, the local hunters, who could aid in the difficult task of spotting them in the trees as well as to learn all the local knowledge available. This time the hunters were making a living squelching through the mud helping to protect the swamper rather than kill it.

A slide show was given to a packed house at the 07 Bar and numerous meetings were held with locals and the authorities.

Utilians are very proud people and the swamper is an example of why they can be proud. With the increased awareness that this study is


bringing to the swamper, there is a good chance that the recent law prohibiting the hunting of the swamper will not need to be enforced. But if need be, the local authorities and Alcalde, Fulton Jackson, are 100% behind the protection of this unique Utilian iguana.

The highlight of the scientists stay was the Earth Day march, when 300 school kids paraded the streets of Utila celebrating the swamper and recognizing the need for its protection.

Currently the news is not good for the swamper. The area studied has a capacity to sustain 300 swampers, yet only 30 were found and less than half were females. A disappointing amount of females were found nesting on the beaches compared to last year and none were found over 3 years old. It would seem that over-

hunting of the older and bigger ones has really taken its toll. Now is the time for urgent action.

A current optimistic estimate is that there are only a few thousand swampers in existence. A hunter on average catches 10 iguanas a day and there are about 20 hunters on the island. Not all these are swampers, but if this hunting were to continue the swamper will certainly only live in our memories, not our lives.

A documentary for German TV is also in the process of being filmed and will be completed in July. Combined with the lectures, articles and publications that the team will be doing when they return home, and the continued work of BICA and COHDEFOR on Utila, the recovery of the swamper is surely certain. 

UTILA IGUANA GETS HELPING HAND FROM FOREIGN FRIENDS

WENDY GRIFFIN
HONDURAS THIS WEEK

The swamper wishwilly is a unique animal. The only place on earth you can see this spiny-tailed iguana is the island of Utila. Unfortunately, the wishwilly is in trouble. A dozen years ago it was common to find up to 40 animals in a single tree, says Web Muñoz, an Utila native. Now you can look all afternoon and find only three or four. If the wishwilly dies out in Utila, there will be no more swamp-dwelling garrobos anywhere else in the world.

There are two agencies responsible for protecting the wishwilly. These are the Utila branch of the Bay Islands Conservation Association (BICA-Utila) and the Honduran Forest Development corporation (COHDEFOR). As an organization previously devoted exclusively to commercial logging, however, COHDEFOR has little institutional capacity to protect endangered species.

Fortunately, the wishwilly has found some foreign friends, and German and Dutch biologists are now working with BICA, COHDEFOR and

the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) to protect the endangered reptile.

In order to plan a conservation program, you first need information about the species you're trying to protect. Is the primary cause for the decline of the animal the overhunting of the female during nesting season, or are there other problems, like pollution or destruction of habitat? If the solution is a ban on hunting during the breeding season, when, exactly, is the breeding season? Would a protected area help? What kind of habitat must be included in the protected area?

A team of biologists was led by Gunther Köhler, who works at Jonan Wolfgang Goethe University and the Senckenberg Museum in Frankfurt, Germany. His local counterpart is Roger Cruz of COHDEFOR. The team began by hiring local wishwilly hunters to work as guides, so that they could earn an income helping the animal rather than hunting it.

Next, a study showed that the overhunting of

Iguana Times

THE JOURNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL IGUANA SOCIETY
\$6.00

VOLUME 5, NUMBER 2
JUNE 1996



Galapagos land iguana,
Conolophus subcristatus.
Photograph: William Hayes