


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

females was indeed the cause of the decline of the animal. None of the hunted females was over three years old and wishywillies don't lay eggs until they are two years old. With this information, it was easier to persuade the municipality to ban iguana hunting and to fine violators.

Bans are easy. The hard part is getting people to comply with them, especially since stewed iguana is one of the favorite traditional foods on the island. The team launched an extensive educational campaign, complete with a slide show, in the schools, and covered the community with posters and information. The approach appears to have worked. Last year biologists found 22 people hunting iguanas during the breeding season. This year they found none.

Not only did the campaign cut down on hunting, it also cut down on the willingness of the people to buy the hunted iguanas.

In addition to raising community awareness and training Hondurans in conservation methods, the wishwilly program had other unexpected results.

The biologists discovered two previously unknown species of lizard and found five other reptile species not known to inhabit Utila. Previously it was believed that the island had only one species of frog. Now scientists know there are at least three, including a little yellow tree frog.

Five agencies helped fund the work of the team: the German Herpetological Society, the German Iguana Society, the Zoological Society for the Conservation of Species and Populations, Bundesverband für Fachgerechten Natur und Artenschutz and the Netherland Herpetological Society. The students in the project paid their own


expenses. When the researchers return in July they will complete a documentary on the project, which will be shown on both Honduran and German television.

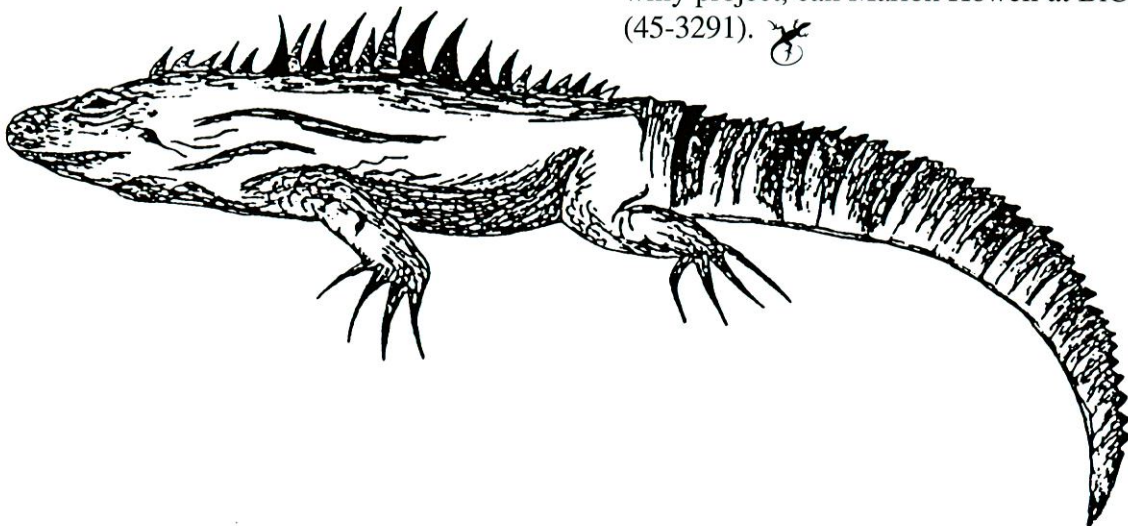
The funds raised through the video will be used to set up a laboratory on Utila for the continued study of the wishwilly. A number of questions remain to be answered before the next series of projects can be implemented, including a wishwilly farm that would further reduce hunting by marketing bred iguanas. The lab will also help stimulate the growing scientific tourism sector.

Roger Cruz says this is COHEDEFOR's first project on the Bay Islands and one of the group's first ventures out of the pine forest and into the beach zones.

It is hoped that the wishwilly project will serve as a model for other such projects on Utila. Honduran scientists and the Utila community now have the skills they need to implement similar projects for other species, especially the five bird, mollusk and rodent species that inhabit the island exclusively.

The UNAH students who participated in the program said they learned more during one week in the field than three years of theory classes. Because many foreign researchers come and go in Honduras, publishing their finds back home in their native languages, the wishwilly project was a welcome one because it relied so heavily on the participation of Hondurans. The participation of the UNAH students was financed by BICA, the Broadleaf Forest Project of Canada and COHDEFOR.

For more information about the Utila wishwilly project, call Marion Howell at BICA-Utila (45-3291). 



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Galapagos land iguana,
Conolophus subcristatus.
Photograph: William Hayes