



DENNIS WALL/THE ORLANDO SENTINEL

Curator Fred Antonio holds 1 of several Jamaican Iguanas being bred at Central Florida Zoo.

## Zoo does its share to save rare iguanas

□ The Central Florida Zoo has launched a breeding program for Jamaican Iguanas.

By Tammie Wersinger

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

SANFORD — The Jamaican Iguana has crawled back from the brink of extinction and into Central Florida.

For more than 50 years, the lizard was thought to have disappeared. Now it's part of a breeding program at the Central Florida Zoo.

"They were written off, just like

the passenger pigeon," said Fred Antonio, the zoo's head curator. "It's like rediscovering a dinosaur or dodo. The international community just flipped out when they were discovered."

The brownish-green lizard, a member of the rock iguana family, has had a long journey back from near-extinction.

It was rediscovered in 1990 in the Hellshire Hills of southeast Jamaica by a hunter whose dog brought him one of the rare reptiles.

Once the hunter realized the significance of his find, he sent the lizard to the Hope Zoo in Kingston. It lived there for a short while before dying from injuries

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## Zoo is among few selected

### IGUANA from C-1

inflicted by the dog.

The Jamaican Iguana Research and Conservation Group, formed after the initial rediscovery, searched the remote Hellshire Hills and found about 50 adult iguanas.

Ten adult females were still laying eggs, but many of their young were being killed by dogs and mongooses.

A research team collected eggs and hatchlings to give them a greater chance of making it to adulthood. Most will be released, while a small number are being used to start a captive-breeding program.

That's where the Central Florida Zoo comes in.

Known for its reputation of breeding and caring for reptiles and

birds, the Sanford park has been selected as one of a few sites in the United States to house the iguanas.

The zoo, which is part of the American Zoo and Aquarium's Species Survival Plan, is tending to three iguanas that were hatched in 1993.

They all have been given extensive medical tests to ensure a diverse genetic background when they begin breeding in a couple of years, said Antonio, who returned this week from Jamaica with his thrilling threesome.

The iguanas will not be exhibited any time soon. The zoo took them in strictly for conservation, Antonio said.

"This is the the world's rarest lizard, and we are an essential element in its conservation," he said.