Moon Over Mayaguana

Return to Booby Cay

John Bendon

Dec 10th 1997

It was with some trepidation that I stepped off the plane in Nassau, watching for Mr. Eric Carey from the Ministry of Agriculture, Bahamas. It had been nine months since my last trip to Mayaguana and I was preparing for the second chapter—the arrangements to ensure the continuing protection of Bartschi's Rock Iguana, *Cyclura carinata bartschi.*

During the time that had passed, I wrote letters, made phone calls, campaigned for money and wrote articles; all about the plight of the Booby Cay Iguana. The image I had of them running free on their own island, enjoying the sun, unaware of the threat to their existence, has stayed with me since my last visit.

The moon still rises over Mayaguana, where the Booby Cay Iguana now lives a safer, more protected existence.

I met with Eric Carey from the Ministry of Agriculture, who gave me the necessary research permit, and Sandra Buckner, from the Bahamas National Trust, who explained the botanical sights I might encounter on Booby Cay. The main point of discussion was the removal of the goats that live on the cay. They are the main threat (apart from man) to the survival of the iguanas and their food source. The goats eat voraciously and could easily multiply and denude parts of the cay, destroying plants essential to the iguanas survival. One proposed solution was to move the goats to the mainland. Alternately, The I.I.S. had offered to pay for a fence to be built to keep the goats from straying and doing damage. With a count last March of only 200 lizards, I decided to pursue the matter to see what could be done as soon as possible.

The morning after our meeting, I set out with camera, permits, letters of introduction and a plant press in hand, emerging from the plane on a sunny morning in Mayaguana.

I was met at the airport by the commissioner of Mayaguana, Mrs. Mildred Williamson, who is the Family Island Administrator for Mayaguana. We went to her office where we were joined by Mr. Thomas Charlton (the son of Rev. Edwin Charlton, the owner of the goats). His family has grazed goats on Booby Cay for many years. Apparently it has always been easy to keep the goats in check there, as no fence was needed and goats do not swim. Unfortunately, the Rev. Charlton had taken ill recently and was flown off the island for treatment. He left instructions with his son, Thomas, to deal amicably with me and see what we could work out.

I started by showing them my photographs of iguanas from various parts of the Americas, explaining that there are many different iguanas, and that each species is unique. The Bahamas has seven different species, two of which only inhabit one cay each. The Booby Cay iguana is one of them. I explained that it lived nowhere else on Earth and that it was different from all other iguanas. I told them how lucky the Mayaguana people were to have such a rare animal in their midst and that the cay that it lived on was totally essential to the life of the iguana.

After all my explanations and photographs, both Mrs. Williamson and Mr. Charlton were very taken with the idea that their island had such a distinguished resident. They were excited by the news that the I.I.S. wanted to put up a sign which tells the story of the iguana to any visitors. I gave Mrs. Williamson some copies of *Iguana Times* (Vol. 6, No. 1) which featured *Cyclura carinata bartschi*

on the front cover, and an article detailing my previous trip. She promised to hand them out to all the schoolteachers on the island so that the children might grow up with respect for an endangered species and its habitat.

The hours I spent with these charming people went quickly, and the final question I had was, "What shall we do?" The answer was immediate. They both thought the goats should be removed as soon as possible. Would it be that easy? The goats apparently could be removed from the cay as soon as it could be arranged, and put on the mainland near Abraham's Settlement. Or, alternatively, they could be turned into curried goat or goat stew. Whatever they did with them, there would be no need for a fence! That immediately eliminated a large part of the cost of this operation—I was very pleased. Additionally, this operation could be done at no expense to Mr. Charlton or his family, and at no expense to the Society. I asked them if it was that simple, and was told that it was.

We all shook hands and it was done. I was very surprised at how easy it really was, but of course it had yet to be achieved.

13th December 1997

I was awakened at 5:30 a.m.—it was still dark at Cap Brown's house, where I was staying. He brought me in a cup of tea and a lunchpack made up by his wife, Doris. I had made arrangements to be taken by boat out to Booby Cay that morning so that I could do another survey, and catch sight of my scaly friends once again.

Half an hour later I was on the boat zooming out over the waves. I saw the sun come up over the Atlantic Ocean, turning the waters yellow and the skies light blue. The pilot, an expert fisherman, guided his boat carefully around the treacherous reefs that surround Mayaguana. After an hour and a half, when we were about 1000 meters from Booby Cay, I saw a pink smudge on the beach, stretching about 100 meters wide. On closer approach the smudge turned into a large group of flamingos standing on the beach, and in the water. I was anxious to land and start photographing them, but I knew that they would all fly off before I got there. As we approached, they did indeed fly off. After exiting the boat, I sat on the beach by a bush and got out my camera and notebook. The

Female subadult, *Cyclura carinata bartschi,* in vegetation. *Photograph: John Bendon*

Tail drags and foot prints, Booby Cay. *Photograph: John Bendon*

fisherman took off, saying he'd be back at lunchtime for me. I sat there alone in the sunrise and the silence, listening for iguanas.

Suddenly, I heard a flapping sound and looked above me to see about eighty flamingos coming in to land. Because I was still, they didn't see me. I didn't move a muscle except for putting a finger on the camera button and slowly putting the viewfinder to my eye. I managed to get some good shots and realized that this was probably a unique experience, possibly the first time anyone has photographed these birds on Booby Cay. The locals had told me that the flamingos land there all the time. The bulk of the Bahamian flamingos live on Inagua, about half an hour away by plane, over 60,000 of them. As I watched, they rooted around on the beach and in the shallow water, then took off, flew around, landed again, took off again, and so on. After 9 a.m. they flew away and did not return.

I started walking around, looking for iguanas and taking note of the vegetation. This time, marking my map where I saw burrows. I saw used and unused burrows. The ones in use had tail

Large adult male in habitat. *Photograph: John Bendon*

Booby Cay, Mayaguana—the realm of *Cyclura carinata bartschi*. *Photograph: John Bendon*

drags leading from them, obviously fresh (see photo), whereas the unused or abandoned ones had no tail tracks around them. It looks like the iguanas dig new burrows for themselves from time to time, and as I toured the cay I discovered one reason for this.

Iguanas are difficult to see because of their markings, their motionlessness, and their ability to see us and scatter before we see them. Nevertheless, I walked around slowly and quietly and they popped up all over the place. I marked on my map where I saw them.

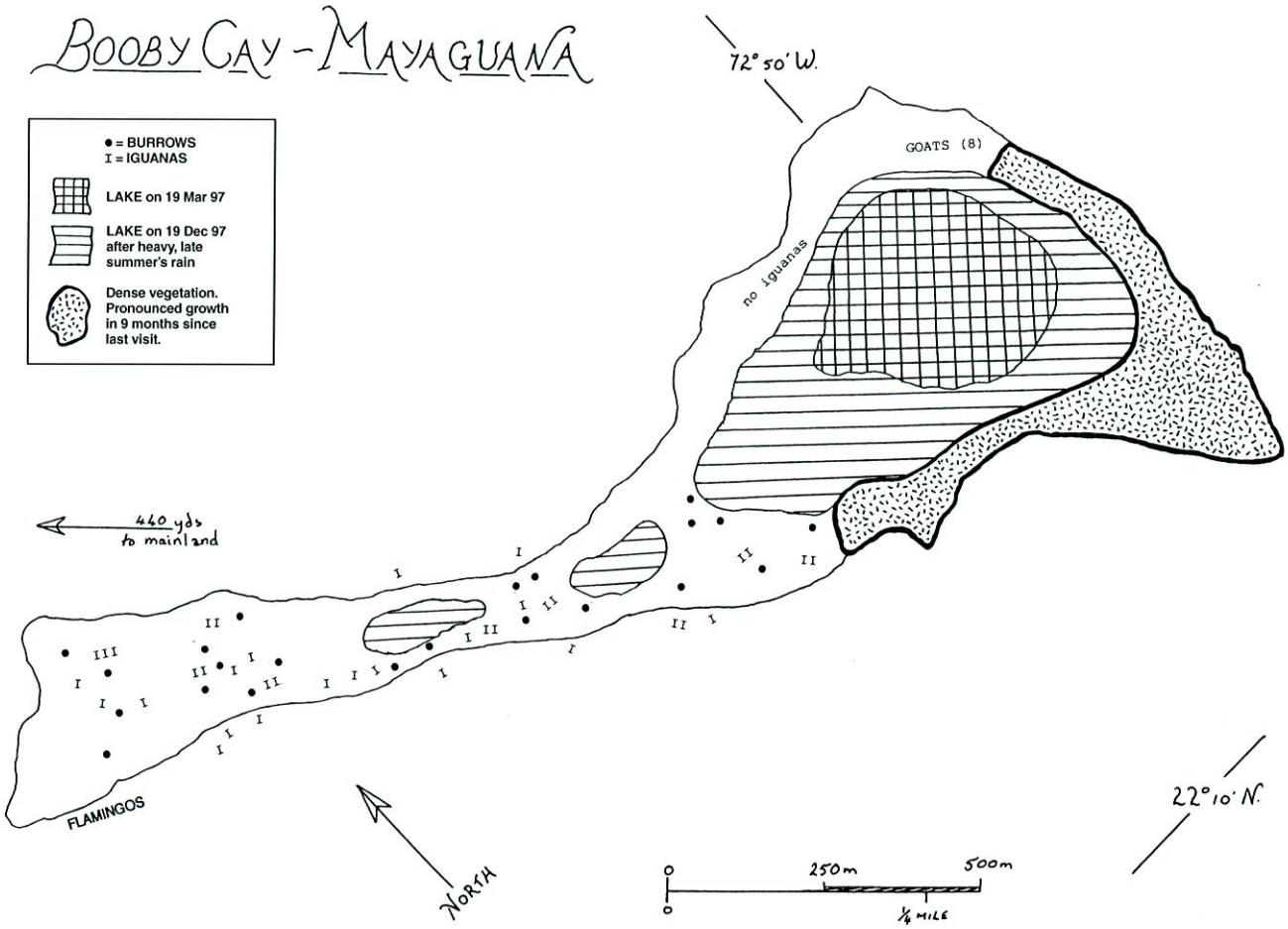
The first one I saw, a male, had dark colored smears around its mouth, and I ascertained that it had just eaten the seedy fruit of the silver buttonwood, a tree that grows on most Bahamian Cays that support iguanas. I also noticed seven year apple, *Sesuvium,* sea grape and *Opuntia,* all of which are eaten by iguanas. The iguanas had obviously been out and about before I arrived as there were fresh tracks all over the place. I found some dried iguana droppings. After examining them, I put them away to take back to Florida for analysis. I tried to photograph some basking iguanas, but they were very quick and darted under bushes, where they could still bask in the narrow rays of light that filtered through the leaves. During this trip, I only managed to photograph the animals by creeping around and looking through bushes. They seemed more timid than the last trip, as I recall a female at the time who had tried to share my lunch. It is a different time of year, so perhaps their behavior is different. There were obviously no gravid females around, all the eggs having been laid and hatched by November and there was no sign of what might be sexual activity. They were just sniffing around, getting their breakfast and enjoying the sun.

With map and camera in hand, I started off around the cay. I decided to walk on the northwestern shoreline first as I had not covered this thoroughly enough last time. I found the beach covered with tail drags and bird tracks, and a very unusual type of track that puzzled me at first. The track was quite strange (and fresh) there in the new sand and it looked just like the track made by the tires of a mountain bike. I made a drawing of it and thought about it for a while. There was a

hole in the ground with this strange track coming from it. It was only later that I realized that it was the track of a hermit crab. I saw more than one and they ranged in size from 1½" to 4" wide.

I continued my walk, counting scurrying iguanas and noting their sex and their burrows. *Cyclura carinata bartschi* is very easy to distinguish sexually. The males are blue-gray with white markings and some white scales, a larger, fatter head, more of a throat fan and bigger jowls. The females are grey-green with some white scales, and a much thinner head and jowls. The color of the female's iris is light yellow, while the male's is a darker yellow. The spines of the female are light-colored, short, stiff and sharp. The male's spines are longer, wider, flatter and flop to one side.

As I went east along the cay, I noticed that the landscape had changed. On my new map, note the size and position of the lake in March 1997. During September there were heavy rains—a yearly occurrence. The dips in the middle of the cay had filled up with water, creating one very large lake and two smaller ones. In the extreme south and east of the cay the vegetation had grown so thick I could not walk through it. I could see, though, by bending down, that the iguanas could live in it easily—there was at least a foot of space between ground level and the first branches of the shrubs. I could see places covered in water where I knew there were old burrows that I saw on my last visit. The lizards would have moved from there, obviously, and dug new burrows on higher ground. An old (1973) ordinance survey map, made by the British, shows Booby Cay almost entirely covered in a lake. This means that the cay's living area is drastically reduced during some parts of the year, forcing them to be more crowded. Perhaps this is why the population is so small, as it is based on square footage at the



Booby Cay, Mayaguana.

leanest time. All the more reason to remove the goats, as goats can graze anywhere and these iguanas specifically need this little island.

Of the 37 iguanas I counted this time, 24 were males and 13 were females (about a 2:1 ratio). This differs from what I found on my last visit where, of approximately 47 animals, the majority were females, and only six were males. I can now add at least 18 males to the overall count from the last trip, making at least 65 animals sighted altogether. I also counted 22 burrows in use and saw unused ones which I did not count. The speed at which they were darting around was amazing. They all seemed very active, although towards the hottest part of the day they slowed down or went back into their burrows.

I took many photographs and was very pleased with the life I saw around me. My time there went very quickly and before I knew it I was being whisked away in the boat, back to the mainland.

Dec 14th 1997

Sundays on Mayaguana are very quiet. I met various people in the street who already knew of my project, and asked if I had been to see the iguanas yet. They all seemed to be interested in what I was doing. Since I would be leaving on the next morning's plane for Nassau, I went down to see Mrs. Williamson, the Commissioner, to say goodbye. I spent that day writing on the beach and went to bed exhausted. When the moon came up that night, it was full and silent.

Epilogue

A final word on all of this, having nothing to do with iguanas: the people of Mayaguana are among the most hospitable and gentle people I have known in all my years of travel. This trip, I was there for four days and met just about everyone in all three settlements. I was made to feel welcome by one and all; I was asked in to everyone's homes.

Before my departure, people arrived at the airport two and a half hours before take-off—it was like a community center social—probably the only time of the week that folk got together to see each other and to see what was what. I was sad to say goodbye. Although this little travelog has come to its end, my own non-scientific approach to scientific conservation continues. The next project will be to concentrate on saving the Sandy or White Cay Rock Iguana, *Cyclura rileyi cristata,* from

Adult female Booby Cay iguana. *Photograph: John Bendon*

Adult male Booby Cay iguana. *Photograph: John Bendon*

almost certain extinction. It is the only other lizard in the Bahamas that is exclusive to one cay. *All* the iguanas of the world are worth saving, as much as any other of the Earth's beasts, and while the moon rises silent and bright over Mayaguana, and the stars speak their stories, ever nearer, ever clearer, Bartsch's lizard will be one of the first to prosper due to our caring. The other Bahamian lizards are waiting in line, unknowingly, and they too, will have their day.

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Entrance of permanent burrow and droppings.
Photograph: John Bendon

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Adult female stout iguana, *Cyclura pinguis*, Guana Island, British Virgin Islands.
Photograph: Gareth Rockliffe