

Two dozen endangered iguanas released to wild: feral cats, loss of habitat threaten once-flourishing species

CNN (Associated Press)
Saturday, October 11, 2003

THE SETTLEMENT, British Virgin Islands -- Scientists have released 24 endangered Anegada rock iguanas into the wild, the culmination of six years of work to protect the rare reptile, scientists said.

The iguanas, once a common sight on the sparsely populated British Caribbean island of Anegada, have fallen victim to a growing population of feral cats, which eat young iguanas after they hatch.

Although there were once thousands of the iguanas living in Anegada, a dry, scrubby island of 15 square miles (39 square kilometers), current estimates put the wild population at fewer than 300.

The Anegada rock iguana, or *Cyclura pinguis*, is related to other rock iguanas that live throughout the Caribbean island chain. The World Wildlife Fund lists the iguana as an endangered species.

"This is a very special iguana," said Rick Hudson, biologist with the Fort Worth Zoo in Texas. "The Anegada iguana is the most primitive. All the other rock iguanas evolved from this animal. In terms of preserved evolutionary potential, this is the most important one of the whole group."

In 1997, the territory's National Parks Trust opened a facility for young iguanas where they could be raised until they are big enough to fend off the cats. Started with just three juvenile iguanas, the facility was home to 90 animals before the release Wednesday and Friday.

The release was a source of pride for residents of Anegada, who have waited six years to reap the benefits of the facility, a complex of cages located adjacent to the island's government outpost in its only town, called The Settlement.

"When I was a girl, we used to see iguanas all over," said Vanessa Walters, a writer and resident who came to watch the release. "It's really great to see this happening."

The two dozen iguanas that were released this week were between 3 and 6 years old, said Kelly Bradley, a researcher at the Dallas Zoo in Texas. They can grow to be a maximum 6 feet (2 meters) long and can live up to 80 years.

Each animal was surgically implanted with a radio transmitter, which Bradley and other scientists will use to monitor their movements.

Next to cats, the iguanas' biggest obstacle to survival is loss of habitat. Although relatively undeveloped, Anegada has lost portions of its untouched interior to grazing livestock.

The scientists and several islanders released 12 of the iguanas Friday. One-by-one, the animals were released from pillowcases used to transport them from the facility. The other 12 had been released Wednesday.

While some bobbed their heads up and down, others stood still, eyeing their new homes. Gradually, the animals disappeared into the scrubland.

Copyright 2003 The Associated Press.
© 2003 Cable News Network LP, LLLP.