PROFILE

Allison Alberts: A Consumate Conservationist

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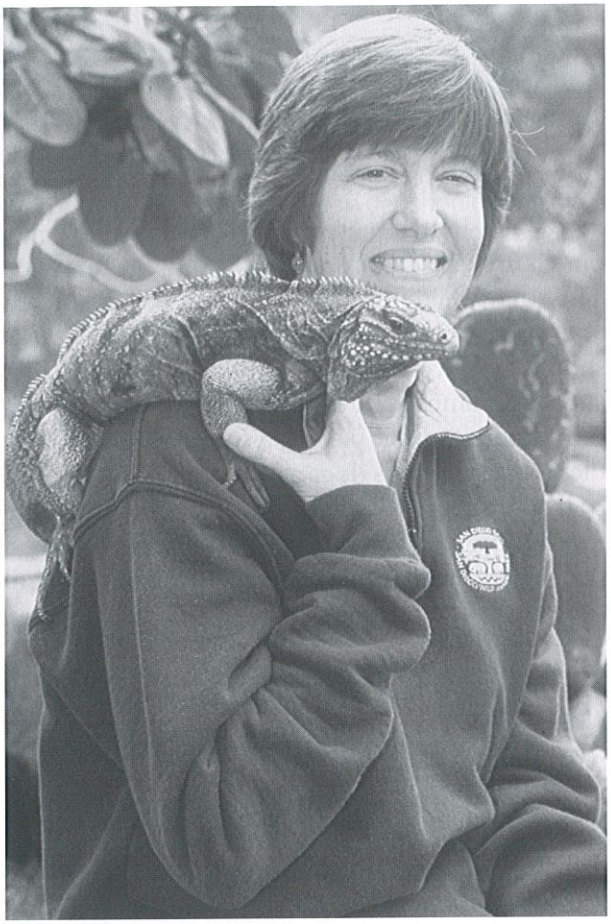
As for so many of us with an interest in iguanas, an early educational experience sparked Allison Alberts to pursue a career in science. She grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area of northern California, an urban center in close proximity to some of the most diverse and beautiful landscapes in the United States. When she entered the University of California–Berkeley, she was undecided in her studies, exploring both English and science. Not until she enrolled in a two-semester course entitled Natural History of the Vertebrates, which included once-a-week field trips, did her enthusiasm for a career in science solidify. After graduating with high honors in biology, she moved to the University of California–San Diego to begin a post-doctoral program. After her first year, she enrolled in the Tropical Ecology course with the Organization for Tropical Studies in Costa Rica. This was the first time Allison had traveled to the tropics and the experience was very influential in developing her career interests. Allison's original thesis topic had been chemical communication strategies among Neotropical bats. However, after a few years (and some crazy adventures in Mexico), she realized that bat research in the tropics was logistically nightmarish and far too costly for a graduate student. She switched her thesis to chemical communication in Desert Iguanas (*Dipsosaurus dorsalis*), a project that could be accomplished in the deserts just east and north of San Diego. In many ways, Allison is thankful that she switched her thesis in mid-stride, as she has indeed fallen in love with lizard ecology!

As a post-doctoral fellow, Allison expanded upon her graduate work by examining communication in a species closely related to *Dipsosaurus,* but which experienced radically different habitat parameters. Wanting to return to the tropics, she began studying Green Iguana (*Iguana iguana*) chemical communication. This research was conducted partly in the field at Dagmar Werner's iguana ranch in Costa Rica, partly in the laboratory at Texas A&M University in College Station, and culminated at the Zoological Society of San Diego's Center for Reproduction of Endangered Species. At CRES, Allison was exposed to a broader scope of research that included conservation as well as academic goals. After becoming an associate scientist at the San Diego Zoo, she began studying the ecology and reproductive biology of a relatively stable population of Cuban Iguanas (*Cyclura nubila nubila*) at the U.S. Naval Station at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. As a group, the Caribbean iguanas are the most endangered lizards



Allison and Cuban Iguana, "Sunny," at the San Diego Zoo.

Young iguana conservationists in training: Allison's children Jonathan (age 4) and Connor (age 6). Allison was instrumental in erecting these iguana-warning signs at the U.S. Naval Station at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

on earth, primarily due to habitat alteration and predation by introduced domestic and feral mammals. Many populations consist solely of adult iguanas with virtually no juvenile recruitment. A large and pioneering part of the Cuban Iguana research, supported by the National Science Foundation, included testing the viability of headstarting as a conservation strategy for depleted populations of large lizards. To quickly rebuild such a population, determining if hatchling iguanas could be raised in captivity until they obtain a size less vulnerable to predators and successfully persist in the wild was essential.

In 1991, the Jamaican Iguana (*Cyclura collei*) was rediscovered in a remnant patch of forest near Kingston. A year later, the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group hosted a Conservation Assessment and Management Plan workshop for iguanids and varanids, which was soon followed by a Population Habitat Viability Assessment workshop for the Jamaican Iguana. As a participant in these two workshops, Allison met many key people concerned with the conservation of Caribbean iguanas. Among these new colleagues was Rick Hudson of the Fort Worth Zoo in Texas, with whom she began incubating the idea of forming a specialist group for Caribbean iguanas. Together they organized the first informal meeting in Miami in 1996, which was attended by 25 people from six countries. Official sanction from IUCN (The World Conservation Union) in 1997 formally established the West Indian Iguana Specialist Group. Since that first meeting, the group has met every year to discuss on-going research, develop recovery strategies, and strengthen collaborations. The partnerships formed have been instrumental in the remarkable population recovery milestones for Caribbean Rock Iguanas seen in the last decade. Headstarting is now being success-

Allison with Iguana Specialist Group members, Rick Hudson, Fort Worth Zoo, and Miguel García, Puerto Rico Department of Natural Resources, leads the 2002 Iguana Specialist Group meeting in the Dominican Republic.

Allison Alberts and Glenn Gerber release Turks and Caicos Iguanas (*Cyclura carinata carinata*) on Bay Cay as part of a long-term restoration program for the species.

Allison and iguana friends (*Cyclura cychlura inornata*) on the Allen Cays, Bahamas.

fully applied to wild populations in Jamaica, Grand Cayman (*Cyclura lewisi*), Mona Island (*Cyclura cornuta stejnegeri*), and Anegada (*Cyclura pinguis*). Dr. Alberts' team has also been investigating how quickly iguana populations can recover after severe habitat disturbance in Cuba and using translocation to restore iguana populations to formerly inhabited cays in the Turks and Caicos Islands.

These days Allison spends less time in the field than in the past. As Head of the Applied Conservation Division at the San Diego Zoo, she oversees a staff of seventeen, with projects that focus on the reintroduction of ecologically important species, sustainable use of natural resources, and Southern California species and habitat conservation. Conservation of iguanas remains a principal focus for her and many of the division's staff members, but the group also is actively involved in reintroduction programs for the California Condor, San Clemente Island Loggerhead Shrike, and Giant Chacoan Peccaries in Paraguay. Additionally, because conservation nearly always requires modifications of human behavior, the division's projects in Madagascar and Mexico work with indigenous communities to develop butterfly-based programs that provide significant income, while at the same time promoting habitat preservation and restoration. Finally, because San Diego is located in one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, the division's research continues to support conservation of Southern California ecosystems, through a seed banking effort and ongoing studies of local birds, mammals, reptiles, and their habitats. Summaries of some of these projects can be viewed on the San Diego Zoo's website (http://www.sandiegozoo.org/conservation/field_projects_list.html).

Allison is the author of over forty journal articles, two books, ten book chapters, and scores of technical reports and popular articles. She has served on numerous editorial review boards and is a key contributor to several professional societies. Today, the West Indian Iguana Specialist Group has expanded its mandate to become a global Iguana Specialist Group that includes members concerned with all iguanids. Allison has been elected Co-Chair since the group's inception, which attests to her skills in diplomacy and communication, and to her science-based approach to conservation. Outside of work, Allison enjoys spending time with her husband Mike and two sons, Connor and Jonathan, as well as swimming, softball, reading, hiking, gardening, and travel. She is distinguished among scientists by her strong conservation ethic and compassion for the animals she studies.