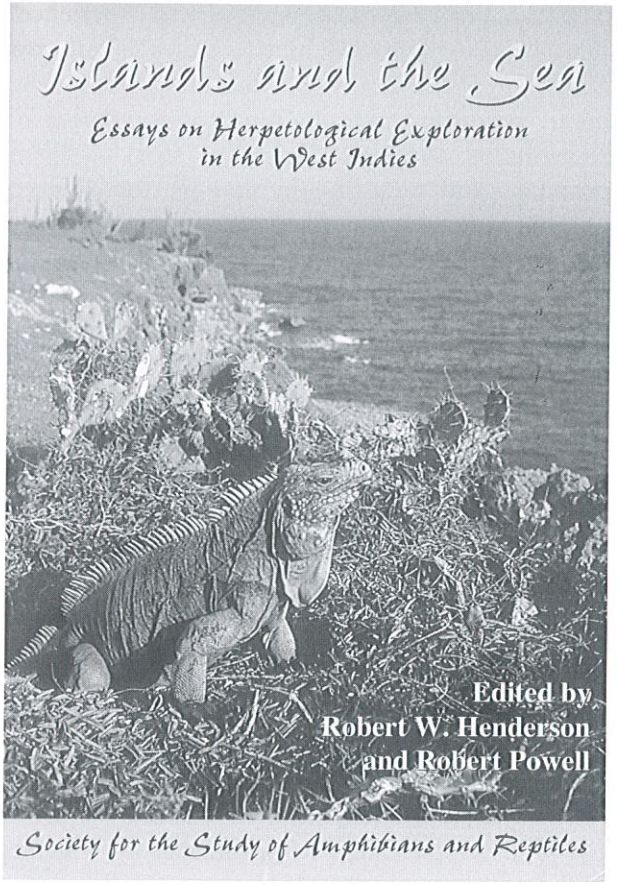
BOOK REVIEW

Islands and the Sea: Essays on Herpetological Exploration in the West Indies. **Robert W. Henderson and Robert Powell (editors). 2003. Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles (SSAR), Ithaca, New York. 312 p., 316 photographs, 14 maps, indices. Clothbound, $48. Available from: Breck Bartholomew, SSAR Publications Secretary, P.O. Box 58517, Salt Lake City, Utah 84158–0517 (ssar@herplit.com).**



I will admit to having a few regrets in my career, and certainly my decision to decline Bob Powell's invitation to contribute an essay to this volume ranks among the highest. For anyone who has dedicated part of their career to working in the Caribbean, for those with a strong interest in the natural history and biogeography of islands, or if you simply enjoy stories of herpetological exploration and discovery, this is must-read material.

The book is well organized, 300 pages divided into six sections corresponding to the major island groups in the Caribbean: the Greater Antilles (Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico), the Bahamas, and the Lesser Antilles. Regrettably, some islands received short coverage, with only one essay on Puerto Rico and none on the Turks & Caicos. Powell and Henderson's introduction and historical perspectives set the tone for the book and provide the reader with a scholarly overview of many of the early herpetologists and remarkable personalities that did much of the pioneering exploration in the West Indies.

Herpetological research in the West Indies is an intriguing pursuit for many reasons, the first and foremost being a remarkable degree of diversity. Recognized as one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, this is particularly evident with herps. An archipelago containing several hundred islands, ranging from huge landmasses to minute specs of land, the Caribbean is a living laboratory of evolution and speciation. Boasting over 600 species of reptiles and amphibians and a remarkably high rate of endemism, the Caribbean ranks second only to Mesoamerica in terms of reptilian diversity (438 species) and has the highest rate of endemism (84%) of any region in the world. Amphibians, though not as diverse, have a comparable rate of endemism (86%). These impressive figures, combined with elevated numbers for vascular plants and birds, provide ample incentive for urgent conservation measures in these delicate ecosystems — but much of the Caribbean is under intense pressure and, sadly, many of us now devote considerable time and energy trying to save the last vestiges of species ravaged by the effects of man. I often wonder, and I know my colleagues share this sentiment, what it would have been like to set foot on these islands 100–200 years ago when they were still largely pristine.

The essays in this volume cover a broad expanse of time, dating from the 1950s to the present. Those early stories of herpetological fieldwork and discovery (Stan Rand and Sixto Incháustegui in the Dominican Republic, Skip Lazell in the Lesser Antilles, Meg Stewart in Jamaica, and Orlando Garrido in Cuba) take us back to a simpler time when collecting was less complicated (except for travel) and the habitats less damaged. The essays on Cuba, to me, are particularly compelling because they offer vignettes into a world that, due to narrow-minded political agen-

Ed. note: This review by Rick Hudson will also appear in the Bulletin of the Chicago Herpetological Society.

BOOK REVIEW

das, few of us have the opportunity to experience. Perhaps the best read in this series is Alberto Estrada's vivid description of collecting herps while on an expedition to find a remnant population of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers. This story is both poignant and haunting in that we are able to glimpse, through a narrow window in time, the last sightings of a species before it slipped quietly into extinction.

The genus *Anolis* has undergone a remarkable degree of speciation in the Caribbean, where it reaches its apex of diversity, providing ample opportunities for fieldwork and research. Nowhere is this more evident than Richard Glor's "Rediscovering the Diversity of Dominican Anoles." Written in a fast-paced narrative, this lively essay recounts the ambitious attempt by him and his colleagues to collect all 40 species of Dominican anoles, a determined mission that literally comes down to the last species on the last day of their trip. An engaging story, this is about as exciting as herpetological reading can get.

Of course, no coverage of the Caribbean herpetofauna would be complete without featuring the prehistoric-looking Rock Iguanas of the genus *Cyclura* for which the islands are so well known. Undoubtedly the most conspicuous element of the region's reptilian fauna (evidenced by the photograph gracing the dusk jacket), these charismatic lizards have become flagship species for conservation in the West Indies. This book includes chapters describing Cuban Iguanas at Guantanamo Bay (Allison Alberts), Andros Iguanas (Chuck Knapp) and Allen's Cay Iguanas (Jen Valiulis et al.) in the Bahamas, Jamaican Iguanas in the Hellshire Hills (Byron Wilson), and Rhinoceros and Ricord's iguanas on Isla Cabritos, Dominican Republic (Sixto Incháustegui). Of particular interest in Sixto's chapter is a rare photo of Michael Carey, a well-known and near legendary (in that he seemed to vanish, dropping out of sight in the 1980s) *Cyclura* biologist, who published some seminal works on the genus through the Florida State Museum. For those of us obsessed with Rock Iguanas in the late 1970s and 80s, his was some of the most treasured reading material available.

Iguana delicatissima is discussed several times in the Lesser Antillean section, nowhere more vividly than in Michel Brueil's account, "In the Footsteps of French Naturalists." He examines the processes (man-made, most harmful and negative, as well as natural) dating back to European colonization that have accounted for some of the perplexing distribution patterns seen in the French West Indies, including that of the genus *Iguana*. His story provides compelling evidence of just how rapidly species' distributions can change over a relatively short period of time, events which should cause us great concern given how this process has been accelerated today. This essay also provides cause for optimism in that it demonstrates the resiliency of many island populations (in this case a population of *I. delicatissima* reduced by half — from an estimated 10,000 to 5,000 — by a severe drought) and their ability to persist and rebound from horrendous natural disasters. This chapter also reinforces the reality that the primary threat to biodiversity in the region is introduced exotics.

My complaints on this book are few and only one merits mention. Photo credits are conspicuously absent from most of the book. They are provided inconsistently, some chapters have them but most do not. Maybe this is just a quirk of mine, but I like to know who shot the images. As it turns out, uncredited photos are by the authors of the respective essays, but nowhere is this explained. I found very few grammatical errors, and the editing appears to be thorough, the exceptions being a disparity in the number of Cuban anoles (59 by Garrido's count; "about 50" according to George Gorman) and a statement in Hinrich Kaiser's essay that *Eleutherodactylus amplinympha* is Dominica's only endemic vertebrate (it is the island's only endemic frog).

All in all, this is a thoroughly enjoyable read and I highly recommend it. If you are already passionate about Caribbean herpetology and working in the islands, this is required reading. If you have not experienced the sheer joy and exhilaration of exploring some of these remarkable destinations, this book should provide the spark that initiates your conversion. The allure of these islands is powerful, and once experienced, hard to shake off. But then who would want to?

Rick Hudson
Co-chair, IUCN Iguana Specialist Group
Program Officer, International Iguana Foundation
Conservation Biologist, Fort Worth Zoo