The Last Dozen

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Once again, juvenile Utila Spiny-tailed Iguanas, known as Swampers (*Ctenosaura bakeri*), are ready to be released into the wild on the Honduran island of Utila. An expedition is prepared to Iron Bound, where the gravid females first surrendered their eggs. Barely 20 months ago, the tiny Swampers squirmed and wriggled their way out of paper-thin eggshells that were becoming too snug. An eggtooth is a handy tool for that kind of job. After hatching, everything was wonderfully warm — after all, the incubators were set for 30 °C. The vermiculite was soft and pleasantly moist — but something wasn't right. Naturally, the little Swampers couldn't know that their very first impulse upon hatching involved a genetic fixation on scrabbling up out of a nest hole that could be as much as 40 cm deep in the sand. Barely had the little iguanas calmed down (since nothing was really amiss), when two large hands reached for the delicate little creatures to weigh, measure, and mark them. They then were placed in cages, from which half of the hatchlings were abruptly carried off to Iron Bound to be released. A year later, a large number of the remaining iguanas were released to the wild, and only 12 remained at the Iguana Research and Breeding Station, which is supported largely by the Zoologische Gesellschaft Frankfurt and the Senckenbergische Naturforschende Gesellschaft.

These 12 Swampers originally were to be equipped with microchips. However, the equipment was unavailable and the decision was made to release the final dozen from the 2002 hatch. Of course, the 12 iguanas were weighed and measured again, had toe-codes read, and femoral pores counted. Then they were packed into cloth bags, resisting in vain with tooth and claw.

Iron Bound is an unspectacular stretch of coast made up of volcanic and coral rock. The small bay with a patch of sandy beach is shrugged off by humans as being too dangerous for swimming due to the sharp-edged rocks. The Swampers, however, care

This healthy young male, photographed moments after release, is testament to the quality husbandry and care provided during the short captive period. *Photograph by Lutz Dirksen.*

The enclosures are in a natural setting and provide ample space for the growing iguanas until they are large enough to be released into the wild. *Photograph by John Binns.*

Excited Utila Iguana Station volunteers release the iguanas where the swamp meets sandy beach of Iron Bound. Volunteers are not funded and pay their own expenses to participate in saving these iguanas. *Photograph by Lutz Dirksen.*

Iron Bound's coast is lined with palm trees, sandy pockets, and rugged volcanic and coral rock. *Photograph by Lutz Dirksen.*

Hatched and raised in captivity until he reached the size at which predation pressure is minimal, this young adult male Utila Iguana views his natural home in the swamps of Utila for the first time. *Photograph by Lutz Dirksen.*

only for what lies beyond the craggy water's edge – the sand, critical for their survival, and the mangroves that begin 100 m from the sea. In the mangroves, Fiddler Crabs scurry underfoot trying to reach their holes in the sand before they are flattened. This spot is ideal for leaving the little Swampers to fend for themselves. They have been fed regularly on mangrove leaves and Fiddler Crabs, as these make up the bulk of their diet in the wild.

The cloth bags are untied one after another, and little heads are followed by the bodies of the rather confused juveniles. Some immediately dart off, but most just look around, not initially comprehending that they are free at last — or that they now have to find food on their own. Slowly they move off in all directions. A particularly intrepid young Swamper scales a tree, where he seems startled at being driven away by one of his wild relatives. Clearly the rules are different here than in the cages at the Station. Here, bitter battles are fought for every scrap of good territory and every available tree hole. No wire mesh keeps the juvenile Swampers safe from predators. Nevertheless, they are not as small and vulnerable as their brothers and sisters released before them. In no time at all, the final 12 will adapt to their lives in the mangroves.

This release included a very special Utila Iguana named "Buddy," who was adopted under the Utila Iguana Adoption Program in December 2003 by John and Sue Porubek.

If you would like to be part of this story, the Station is continually seeking new volunteers, so that the same drama can be repeated again next year.