Pharaoh: A Tribute

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After seven years, "Pharaoh," a male Grand Cayman Blue Iguana (*Cyclura lewisi*), will be leaving the Deserts exhibit at the Indianapolis Zoo in 2005. Based on a recommendation for breeding by the coordinator for AZA's West Indian Rock Iguana Species Survival Plan, the Indianapolis Zoo has agreed that Pharaoh should be relocated to the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, Texas. During summer 2005, a very young breeding pair of Grand Cayman Blue Iguanas will be arriving at the Indianapolis Zoo. The pair is currently in quarantine at the San Diego Zoo, after being sent from Grand Cayman earlier this year. These iguanas represent "founder" animals for the U.S. zoological Blue Iguana breeding program. The earliest expected breeding of this pair would be in 2006.

When I first came to the Indianapolis Zoo as a volunteer in 2001, one of the first animals I met was "Pharaoh," a four-foot-long, bright electric blue monster of a lizard. Pharaoh is a Grand Cayman Blue Iguana (*Cyclura lewisi*), a very rare lizard in the wild, and especially rare in zoological collections. Pharaoh is a little more unpredictable than the other animals in the Deserts exhibit, as I and the rest of the volunteers quickly discovered. He has this way about him, this strut of sorts that demonstrates that he knows he is the king of his domain — perhaps this is the origin of his name. He is not afraid to offer small head-bobs of recognition as you enter the exhibit, building into more deliberate movements of territoriality as you slowly approach. Then he takes a step or two toward you with mouth agape before abruptly turning away at the last moment, moving back a few feet just to start it all over again. Today, I am a Senior Keeper, and he remains Zoo royalty, and he still considers me to be his lowly servant bringing his food and cleaning his kingdom.

In 1999, Pharaoh came to the Indianapolis Zoo from Grand Cayman and the Cayman Islands National Trust. He was sent to us as an animal ambassador of sorts, since Blue Iguanas are found solely on the island of Grand Cayman. The island has many species of plants and animals that are endemic (found nowhere else in the world), but the Blue Iguana is arguably the most special. Pharaoh represents the most critically endangered species of lizard in the world, with fewer than 50 left in the wild out of a population that once numbered in the thousands. To put this in perspective, although they are rare in zoo collections, hundreds of Chinese Giant Pandas are left in the wild, far outnumbering Blue Iguanas. Pharaoh is an ambassador from Grand Cayman making a last plea for help to save his kind.

At the beginning of 2005, there were only 21 blue iguanas spread among nine zoological institutions in the United States. With so few Blue Iguanas in the U.S., visitors rarely hear this species' cry for help. Pharaoh is what is called a "founder" animal; his genes are not represented anywhere else in the U.S. population. To educate and promote awareness of the Blue Iguana among the general public, we hope that individuals like Pharaoh will successfully breed and produce offspring. More offspring means more Blue Iguanas in more zoos. More "little Pharaohs" running around mean more genetic diversity for the entire captive Blue Iguana population.

Pharaoh strikes a majestic pose: He has been the undisputed "king" of the Indianapolis Zoo's Deserts exhibit for the past seven years.

At the Indianapolis Zoo Deserts exhibit, Pharaoh keeps up on all the latest fashions. He patiently waits near the front glass of the exhibit just to look at and hope to get a taste of the latest brightly colored shoes — shoes that resemble fruit, the candy of the iguana world. Likewise, he is easily noticed on exhibit. He impresses visitors daily with his size, swagger, and color. During a normal day in the Deserts exhibit, Pharaoh is the star of the show, but, in the afternoons, visitors get an even more exceptional display. Around 2:30 pm each day, our exhibit animals are offered insects or fruit in addition to the mixed salad they received earlier in the day. A grape speeding across the exhibit substrate brings on a demonstration of the excellent sight and swiftness of the Blue Iguana. As the sound of Pharaoh racing over the dirt and gravel echoes in the building, visitors pop up from around corners of other exhibits to catch a glimpse. Our visitors are surprised to see this monster excitedly eating his fruits and vegetables. Parents often comment with envy, "If only little Bobby would eat his fruits and veggies like that."

Although fruits and vegetables are his favorite treats, Pharaoh's ultimate desire is for birdseed. As keepers, we do not

Pharaoh is being transferred to the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, Texas in an effort to optimize his chances of reproductive success.

quite understand the origin of his obsession. Wild Blue Iguanas are primary vehicles for plant and tree seed dispersal. They eat the fruits, walk away, defecate, and the following year another plant or tree begins to climb out of the ground toward the sky. However, birdseed, not contained with a sweet or colorful fruit, is a bit different from the typical seeds iguanas help to disperse. The Indianapolis Zoo's other three Grand Cayman Blue Iguanas, three Jamaican Iguanas (*C. collei*), and two Rhinoceros Iguanas (*C. cornuta*) couldn't care less for birdseed. Only Pharaoh jumps at it and will do almost anything for it. Even Fred Burton, Director of the Blue Iguana Recovery Program (www.blueiguana.ky), who sent Pharaoh to us, cannot explain this peculiar behavior. Birdseed is the most precious loot this scaly Caribbean pirate could steal to bury in the depths of his stomach.

Pharaoh is not just an impressive exhibit animal at the Zoo. He came to us from Grand Cayman in an effort to get him to breed with females already in the U.S. However, his role producing offspring is not his only job. He is a novel research subject. Over the years, we have studied his behavior in an effort to identify specific reproductive cues and territorial characteristics. We have studied his blood and compared it to blood of other captive iguanas, as well as to that of wild iguanas. Most recently, we are studying hormone levels in his feces in an innovative approach to understanding his reproductive cycle. Throughout these research duties, Pharaoh rarely "complains" of his job at the Zoo. After all, he gets to harass and chase us while getting an occasional tail-whip in, and then gets paid in grapes and birdseed.

However, one of his primary duties in the country is to reproduce. Although seven years have passed, Pharaoh has no offspring. Overall, reproduction of Rock Iguanas (lizards in the genus *Cyclura*, Grand Cayman Blue Iguanas and their Caribbean relatives) is limited and inconsistent at all of the best zoos in the U.S. Cues from our vast knowledge of Green Iguanas (*Iguana iguana*) have provided little help. As researchers, we are just starting to identify behaviors of many Rock Iguanas in the wild, including reproductive behaviors. With this knowledge, Pharaoh's next best chance for reproduction could be with a female Blue Iguana at a zoo in Texas.

To encourage successful breeding for Pharaoh, the Indianapolis Zoo has decided to send this giant blue monster of a lizard to a zoo in Brownsville, Texas. Although his departure is difficult for us, we retain many fond memories of Pharaoh at the Indianapolis Zoo. While he isn't exactly cute or cuddly, like many of the warm-and-fuzzy zoo animals favored by many visitors, he is impressive with his fantastic other-worldly color and his large size. How many other animals are four feet long and bright blue? He is charismatic and attentive. With his extraordinary red eyes, he has seen almost every visitor who walked by his exhibit. He is a "magnet." He attracts all sorts of people, from visitors to keepers, and even the Zoo's own CEO became enamored with him within his first few weeks at the Zoo, often telling the story of the endangered Blue Iguanas to donors, the media, and anyone who would listen. All of us at the Indianapolis Zoo hope that Pharaoh will be a magnet to a Blue Iguana female and achieve reproductive success in his new Texas home.

The Indianapolis Zoo inspires local and global communities to celebrate, protect, and preserve our natural world through conservation, education, and research, and by providing an enriching and wondrous environment for our visitors and the animals in our care. The Zoo is accredited by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association — your assurance that you are supporting a facility dedicated to providing excellent care for animals, a great experience for you, and a better future for all living things. Visit us at http://www.indyzoo.com.