SOS call for ancient blue iguana
By Georgina Kenyon
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Cayman Islands - Cayman Island scientists are calling for assistance to pull a unique species of blue iguana back from the brink. The animal has a long history: DNA evidence suggests it has been around for the past three million years. However, the mere 25 of them left on Grand Cayman seemed recently to face a dismal future.

"Time is obviously not on the side of this remarkable creature," said Fred Burton, director of the Blue Iguana Recovery Programme (BIRP). "But there are no insurmountable biological, political or social barriers to the re-establishment of a viable wild population. Saving the blue iguana really boils down to the human financial resources we can direct to the task."

On the brink
The BIRP is significant in the study of how a species can be brought back from the brink of extinction. With a heady mixture of science, iguana ingenuity, understanding of iguana psychology, and local and international support and funding - scientists believe they may just be able to bring the iguanas back to a critical mass required to sustain a population.

The blue iguana's problems stem from humans, though for the most part the damage to the iguanas has been quite unintended. The first European settlers arrived nearly 300 years ago, and the pets that they brought with them, such as dogs and cats have continued to push the iguanas back from the coast and into less hospitable inland areas. The displacement and land-use change has accelerated with a major human population boom in the last half-century.

The blue iguanas, named because of their skin which turns slowly from slate grey to blue throughout the day as the sun shines, were once shot and eaten by people and are still attacked by pets.

The BIRP hatches and rears blue iguanas for two years, so sparing them the severe mortality that would usually decimate a year's hatch. The pioneer blue iguanas are then released back into the wild and radio-tracked as they mature and start breeding. These studies are providing vital information for the development and management of a protected area.

The iguanas have strong personalities and are superbly adapted to their natural environment and they are learning to cope with today's world in different ways. As fast learners, the iguanas have expanded their natural diet of some 50 or so native plant species, to over 130 by discovering new edible plants brought to the islands by horticulturalists and landscapers. They can also adapt to a man-made environment (if there are no dogs or cats); they are as happy sleeping under a wooden shed as in a natural rock

hole.

Playing cupid

Hope also lies with the design by BIRP workers of honeymoon suites for the iguanas breeding in captivity which include specially constructed retreats and a carefully prepared diet of fruits, flowers and assorted greenery.

"Iguanas are fairly basic in this area. Good food, plenty of sunshine and a nice place to nest and hang out and they will pretty much get on with it," said Dr Matthew Cottam, special projects officer at the Cayman Islands Department of the Environment, who works with the BIRP.

But is it too late for the iguanas? Can they be saved?

"The captive breeding programme is going from strength to strength," said Fred Burton. "Our monitored releases are working brilliantly so far. If we can protect enough habitat and maintain it free of unnatural predators, there is every reason to hope we can give the blue iguanas their future back.'

"This is one species we can save."

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