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Blue Iguana still needs man's help

Cliodhna McGowan

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From left, Grand Caymanian Managing Director Theresa Foster with Blue Iguana Recovery Programme Director Fred Burton and National Trust Chairperson Carla Reid
Photo: Cliodhna McGowan

Despite all the wonderful work achieved by the Blue Iguana Recovery Programme over the past five years, the Cayman Blue Iguana is still the most endangered lizard on earth.

Concerned scientists, conservationists, Blue Iguana experts and government representatives got together last week to put their heads together in order to figure out how to continue saving Cayman's own Blue Iguana from extinction.

And helping the team along the way was Grand Caymanian Managing Director Theresa Foster who provided free accommodation, meeting space and refreshments for the forward thinking group.

"Theresa and the Grand Caymanian are hosting this to a ridiculous extent. We can't thank her enough," said Blue Iguana Recovery Programme Director Fred Burton.

The group consisted of: National Trust Chairperson Carla Reid; Blue Iguana Recovery Programme Director Fred Burton along with staff members Chris Carr and Samantha Addinall; Department of Environment Director Gina Ebanks–Petrie and DoE's Special Projects Officer Mat Cottam; representatives of Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, Wild Conservation Union Iguana Specialist Group, International Reptile Conservation Foundation.

"These people are friends and allies that bring in resources to our programme," explained Mr. Burton.

The team spent Wednesday and Thursday putting their heads together to come up with a plan for conserving the iguanas over the coming years. A field trip was scheduled for the group on Friday.

Back in 2001 the first strategic plan was written up to save the Blue Iguana. This plan has now been accomplished.

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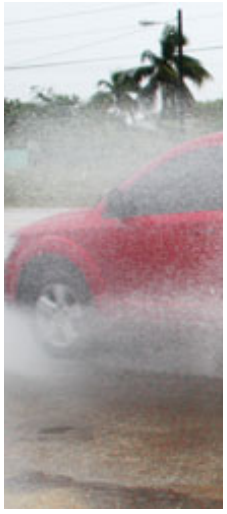

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"Back then we didn't even know how many Blue Iguanas were left in the wild," commented Mr. Burton. However, a population survey soon disclosed that shockingly, there were only 10 to 25 left.

The improved captive breeding facility at the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park has resulted in tremendous success in breeding and now over 80 iguanas a year are hatching. There are now 30 free roaming blue iguanas in the Botanic Park and 23 have been released into the Salina Reserve.

But a fresh look needs to be taken at the where the programme, which is dependent on donations and charitable grants, is going.

Local corporate support provides the biggest funding followed by that of international conservation groups including The Darwin Initiative.

One thing the meetings have put in perspective is just how much work is still left to do, asserted Mr. Burton, who explained that the Cayman Blue Iguana is still the most endangered lizard on earth.

One of the biggest challenges is getting enough protected habitat to allow the programme to restore a viable live population of Blue Iguanas into the wild.

"The Salina Reserve and the Botanic Park cannot support enough iguanas to have a viable live population so we're looking at additional areas. This could mean finding a new area or the management of existing areas," he said.

Another element being looked at is funding. "We need more money now on a sustainable basis and we're looking at grant funding opportunities and at how iguana related tourism can make an income for us," he said.

Cruise passenger tours at the iguana facility at the Botanic Park started in May, but so far bookings have not been great. It is hoped that coming into high season these will improve.

Ms Alison Alberts, of the Wild Conservation Union Iguana Specialist Group, who has supported the iguana programme in Cayman from the outset, pointed out that the same themes keep coming up. One of these is the need to educate people that this animal is found nowhere else on earth. Another is the fact that the population requires intensive management to keep it growing.

The conservation biologist cites the Cayman Blue Iguana as her favourite species. "They are more complex and highly adapted to their environment than people give them credit for," she said.

They also contribute to a healthier forest environment, as important seed dispersers, she said.

Mr. Quentin Bloxam of Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust describes the Blue Iguana Recovery Programme as one of the best run and high quality conservation programmes.

He pointed out that saving the species requires acquisition of a reasonable size habitat in the Eastern district. This would also help save the dry forest, which is the most endangered type of forest in the world. In this way, a biodiversity system would be saved. The issue of wild dogs and cats attacking iguanas also needs to be addressed, as does confusion between green iguanas and the rare Blue Iguana.

The Grand Caymanian's Blue Iguana Grill supports the National Trust's Blue Iguana Recovery Programme by giving information about this work to tourists and the placement of fund–raising boxes on the premises. The kid's club at the resort also teaches children about this endangered species which is native to Cayman. Ms Theresa Foster commented, "Sponsoring

which is native to Cayman. Ms Theresa Foster commented, "Sponsoring the Blue Iguana Recovery Programme is important because they are an indigenous species so it is important to keep it an indigenous species and I don't think the awareness on this is as big as for other local issues."

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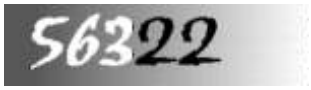

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