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Leapin' Lizards! Some See Boom in Iguana Population

March 25, 2008 -- Rafe Boulon, who heads V.I. National Park's Resource Management Division, has seen a marked increase in the number of iguanas on St. John.
"They're all over the place," he said.
Boulon used to see them only in places like Chocolate Hole and Great Cruz Bay, but now he sees the big lizards at such unlikely places as the driveway at Trunk Bay. And they've been spotted crossing Centerline Road near Grunwald.
Renata Platenberg, a biologist with the Fish and Wildlife Division of the Planning and Natural Resources Department, located on St. Thomas, isn't sure about the iguana situation on St. John, but said it's possible the numbers are rising. On St. Thomas, she said, they're everywhere.
"I see them smooshed on the roads," she said.
Females carrying eggs head for the roads because they're looking for a warm spot to heat up, Platenberg said.
Frequent rainfalls during the winter increased the amount of foliage available for iguanas to eat, Boulon said. They're found in large numbers at the Westin Resort and Villas on St. John because of the lush landscaping at the resort, he said.
Iguanas can move right into plant nurseries, Boulon said.
Tourists often feed iguanas at St. Thomas restaurants and resorts, Platenberg said. Once the iguanas figured this out, they became permanent residents.
"They like French fries," she said.
Boulon also noted that a virus about 10 years ago reduced the mongoose population, which may have cut down on the number of predators attacking the baby iguanas.
It's rare to see an iguana on St. Croix, said Planning spokesman Jamal Nielsen. Fewer Crucian sightings could mean they're not as welcome at St. Croix resorts as they are on St. Thomas and St. John, or that the island has more land for habitat, making them harder to spot, Platenberg said.
Development on St. John could be pushing iguanas out of more remote areas so they're more easily visible, she acknowledged.
"That's a good theory," Platenberg said.
Iguanas are native to Central and South America, but no one knows when they arrived.
"It's likely they were brought in as a food source, possibly by Amerindians," Platenberg said. "Or they might be more recent."
In Puerto Rico, iguanas arrived about 50 years ago as pets, she said. While they're not dangerous, they will bite if provoked, she said.
And iguanas can cause problems with walls. They dig under walls, Platenberg said, causing them to collapse.
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