DOUG BELL

The author surveying dry shrubland habitat in government land designated for a nature reserve.

CONSERVATION NEWS

One Species That Will Be Saved: The Grand Cayman Blue Iguana

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Blue Iguana Recovery Program

Tremendously exciting news has just broken on Grand Cayman, where the Cayman Islands government has taken decisive action to save the world's most endangered iguana. Almost 200 acres of prime dry shrubland habitat in the eastern interior of the island is being protected by a 99-year lease agreement from the government to the National Trust for the Cayman Islands.

The decision by the government is the culmination of many years of planning and discussion with all of the partners in the Blue Iguana Recovery Program (BIRP). Most recently, the third version of the Species Recovery Plan for the Grand Cayman Blue Iguana (*Cyclura lewisi*) revolved almost entirely around the issue of protected land.

Operating under the aegis of the National Trust, and partnering with the local Department of Environment and the QE II Botanic Park, the BIRP has achieved remarkable progress over the last seven years, bringing the wild population of Blue Iguanas from scarcely a dozen in 2002 to some 250 in the wild by 2009. Supported also by its international partners, especially the International Reptile Conservation Foundation and the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, the BIRP completed a pilot restoration of wild Blue Iguanas in the QE II Botanic Park, and then deployed its tried and tested techniques to embark on large-scale population restoration in the Salina Reserve.

The Salina Reserve is a 625-acre wilderness area in the north-eastern interior of Grand Cayman. It is protected by the National Trust, and includes areas of sawgrass wetland, buttonwood swamp, and a significant stand of dry forest. Blue Iguana habitat (Grand Cayman's dry "xerophytic" shrubland) is at most 85 acres, account-

JOHN BINNS

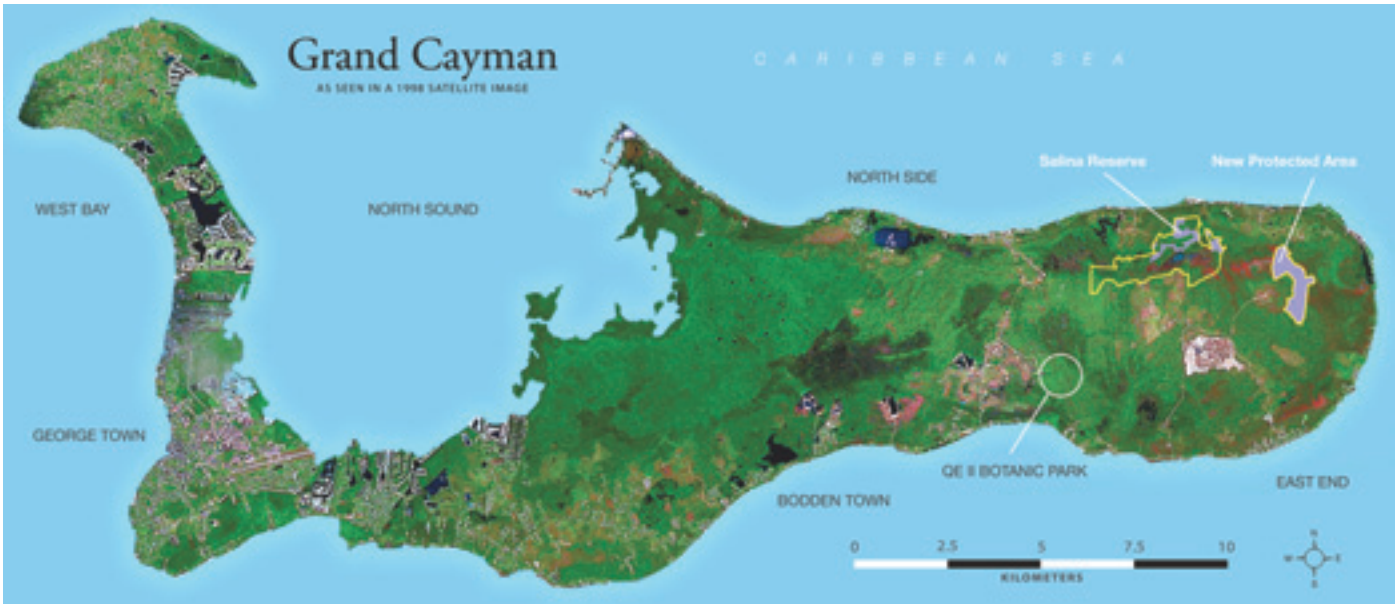
The provision of protected land suggests that Grand Cayman Blue Iguanas can be saved from extinction.

DOUG BELL

The Species Recovery Plan for the Grand Cayman Blue Iguana revolves almost entirely around the issue of protected land.

ing for less than 14% of the Salina Reserve. This severely limits the extent to which a self-sustaining wild population of Blue Iguanas can be restored there.

By 2008, the BIRP was in danger of losing momentum, with the Salina habitat approaching carrying capacity. The Program had already been forced to slow down the rate of releases in order to bal-



JOHN BINNS

Government land designated for a new dry shrubland nature reserve will become the third area to support released Grand Cayman Blue Iguanas. Purple shading shows good Blue Iguana habitat.

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Although formidable and intimidating for human visitors, a proposed visitor center will emphasize the importance of the rugged karst landscape for conserving Grand Cayman's native biota.

ance genetic contributions from all possible family lines before the population grew too large to accept more iguanas. Without more protected land becoming available, population restoration for the Blue Iguanas was about to stall.

Fortunately, at the same time, years of work in many areas were beginning to pay off. A long-latent European Union grant proposal, shared with the Turks & Caicos Islands and the British Virgin Islands, finally came together in 2008. In the Cayman Islands, the project promised funds to build a visitor center for a proposed new nature reserve featuring the dry shrubland ecosystem — and the Grand Cayman Blue Iguana. The Cayman Islands Government agreed in principle to support the project by contributing government land for the protected area.

From principle to practice was still a long road, beginning with some false starts and disappointments, but gradually a concept that seemed viable gained general acceptance and progressed within the government to a formal proposal to the cabinet. On 31 March 2009 the BIRP and all its partners were overjoyed to hear the news that a new protected area was to become a reality.

In effect, this opens the final chapter in the bid to save the Grand Cayman Blue Iguana from extinction. All of the ambitious elements of the current Species Recovery Plan now look to be fully viable, and the BIRP's workload is set to expand tremendously in the next few years.

Especially if the Cayman Islands are successful in adding some additional adjacent land to the new protected area, enough Blue Iguana habitat may well be available to raise the wild Blue Iguana population to a level that can be self-sustaining in the long term. A tantalizing future is in sight, where a captive breeding program may no longer be needed, and in which protected Blue Iguanas of all ages and sizes are roaming free, breeding, and sustaining their numbers without the need for constant human intervention.

From a scenario of little hope in 2002, the BIRP and its partners are now in sight of the kind of success that is all too rare in the world today. The Grand Cayman Blue Iguana can be saved from extinction, and, in a few more years, the Cayman Islands may be able to boast that they have achieved just that.

DOUG BELL

Grand Cayman's dry "xerophytic" shrubland is ideal habitat for Grand Cayman Blue Iguanas (*Cyclura lewisi*).

The Blue Iguana Recovery Program is honored and grateful to all those who have and continue to support its mission of restoring the Grand Cayman Blue Iguana to its natural habitat. Thank you!

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