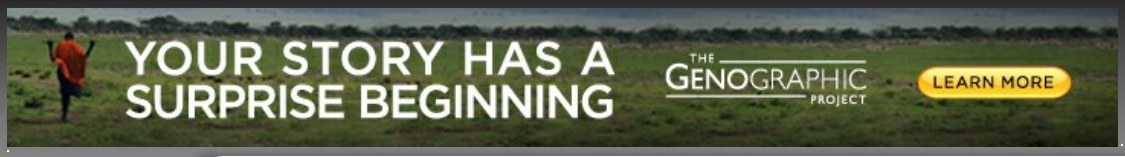




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# Guantanamo's Wild Side: Huge Boas, "Banana Rats," More

Brian Handwerk
for National Geographic News
April 3, 2009

**ON TV** *Explorer: Inside Guantanamo* airs Wednesday, April 8, at 8 p.m. ET/PT on the National Geographic Channel. Details >>

Detainees may be leaving the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, but a host of rare animals—giant snakes, "banana rats," nesting sea turtles—are there to stay, protected by the same razor wire fences that keep prisoners in (Guantanamo animal pictures).

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Best known for its controversial role in the U.S. "war on terror," the Guantanamo Bay base is also an important refuge for animals pressured by Cuba's tough economic conditions.

"The protein situation is poor in Cuba," explained the Toledo Zoo's Peter Tolson, who has years of experience reserching wildlife at Guantanamo Bay. "There are laws that protect [animals] on paper, but in general there is not a lot of enforcement.

People are eating Cuban boas and rock iguanas, Tolson said.

But on the Guantanamo base's 28,800 acres (11,660 hectares), plants and animals found only in Cuba thrive in virgin subtropical dry forests and swim in clear waters along relatively undisturbed coastline.

"There is an overt effort on the part of the [U.S.] Navy to protect what's there," Tolson added.

The United States has operated Naval Station Guantanamo Bay since 1898, during the Spanish-American War. The country maintains the base by virtue of a lease that can end only by the consent of both Cuba and the U.S.

**Giant Snakes and Rock Iguanas**

Tolson works with the Navy to radio-track Cuban boas on the base, where their numbers and sizes, he said, are incredible. The snakes are listed as near threatened on the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

"We routinely find animals ten feet (three meters) long and larger. My correspondence with Cubans who are studying them indicates that [such large snakes] are extremely rare in mainland Cuba," he said.

The Cuban rock iguana, which the IUCN lists as vulnerable, also thrives—and reaches great sizes—on the base.

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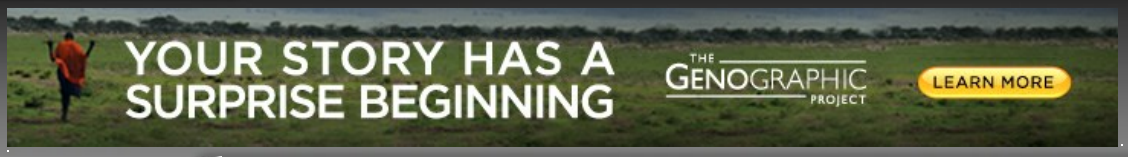




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"The IUCN's iguana specialist group estimates that Guantanamo contains anywhere from 6 to 8 percent of the Cuban rock iguanas in Cuba," Tolson added—a surprisingly large portion, given the U.S. base's small footprint.

"You can see on a map how small that place is compared to the rest of Cuba and you get an idea of what an important refuge it is."

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(See also "Cuba, Naturally" from *National Geographic* magazine.)

**"Banana Rats" by the Bunch**

Guantanamo is also home to the hutia, known to base personnel as the banana rat.

Some hutia species have been eaten to extinction around the Caribbean. But Guantanamo actually has too many of the groundhog-like rodents, which are damaging the landscape and denuding trees and undergrowth, officials say.

Michael McCord, the Gunatanamo base's environmental director, said the rodent problem has led to a unique agreement by which environmental staff, contractors, and others kill excess animals.

"We have a permit from the Cuban government to control the hutia population on the installation, as well as protect the boas and one of the owl species, and we've taken it to heart to do that," he said.

The pact is one of the very few formal agreements between the U.S. and Cuba, McCord said.

(Related video: "Cuba Gets Green Cred.")

**Waters House Corals, Turtles**

Guantanamo Bay hosts a sparkling marine ecosystem, a heavily patrolled 9,000-acre (3,640-hectare) home to fish, coral, and other aquatic animals.

Sea turtles nest on Guantanamo beaches year-round, encouraged by turtle-friendly yellow lighting and restrictions on access to sensitive nesting areas.

Biologist Craig Downs researches elkhorn coral at the naval base.

The species, listed as critically endangered by the IUCN, is dying all over the Caribbean—except off southern Cuba.

"The coral reefs in Guantanamo are gorgeous," said Downs, of Virginia-based Haereticus Environmental Laboratory.

Though the reefs draw plenty of interest from Navy snorkelers and divers, such activities are stringently managed, and the reefs are well protected from threats like overfishing, added Downs, who works at the base with a team affiliated with the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and several U.S. universities.

Guantanamo's reefs are also spared many land-based threats, such as runoff from industry or large-scale farming. Such activities are negligible on the base and not

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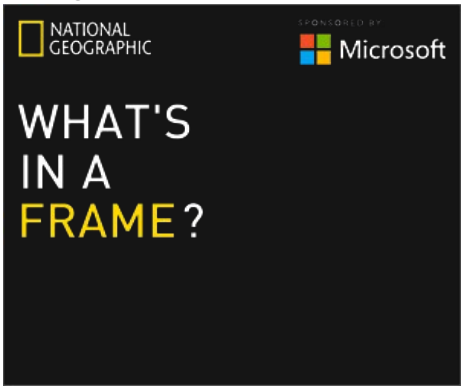


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extensive in surrounding areas, where dry weather also limits runoff.

"It's one of the nicest sites in the Caribbean. The corals there look like they did 50 years ago. They're huge and reproductively viable," he said.

The Guantanamo coral population is so unspoiled, he said, that the team will use it as the gold standard for a normal, healthy Caribbean reef when the researchers study other reefs in the region.

**Limited Access**

Jennifer Gebelein of Miami's Florida International University studies Cuba's physical environment and says that some plant and tree species, like highly prized Cuban mahogany, benefit from limited human access at Guantanamo.

"From a [natural] state of maybe 80 to 90 percent forest, what you see now when you drive through Cuba is primarily pastureland and really wide open grasslands that have replaced a lot of the forests," she said.

"Mahogany is a pretty sought-after tree elsewhere on the island."

Base environmental director McCord takes pride in the Navy's management initiatives to protect such species, but says that geography also plays an important role.

"The eastern side of the base is very rugged, hilly country, and not a lot of people go in there," he said.

"Animals can go where they want to go, and do what they want to do, with very little stress from human interaction."

That protected status is likely to continue indefinitely. Though U.S. President Barack Obama has pleged to close the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp, or "Gitmo," the base, and the animals, are expected to remain indefinitely.


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