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ENVIRONMENT

Iguanas making a comeback, but still under threat

Wednesday, August 29, 2012



WHILE

several indigenous animals are at risk of extinction, the Jamaican iguana is better off today than it was at the island's Independence in 1962 when it was thought to be extinct.

This is according to Dr Byron Wilson, a zoologist and lecturer at the University of the West Indies, Mona.

Wilson, who also heads the Jamaican Recovery Group, said the number of female iguanas nesting in sections of the Hellshire Hills had moved from eight in 1991 to 40 this year.

He was speaking at the 50-50 Conference hosted by the Sir Arthur Lewis Institute for Social and Economic Studies at the University of the West Indies, held last week at the Jamaica Pegasus Hotel.

Originally thought to be extinct, the Jamaican iguana — known scientifically as *Cyclura collei* — was rediscovered in 1970 and again in 1990.

"The 1970 'rediscovery' — the retrieval of a carcass from a pig hunter's dog — generated surprisingly little international interest; but perhaps of more consequence, there was no resident herpetologist [zoologist who deals with reptiles and amphibians] in Jamaica at the time," writes Wilson in his book *On the Brink of Extinction: Saving Jamaica's Vanishing Species*, presented at the 7th annual Environmental Foundation of Jamaica public lecture, held last October.

"The 1990 rediscovery was different. This time, a live (though mortally wounded) specimen was brought into the Hope Zoo in Kingston, and this time Jamaica did have a resident herpetologist in the late Peter Vogel, at the University of the West Indies, who helped form the Jamaican Iguana Research and Conservation Group, which embarked on a conservation crusade that is continuing today," he added, citing research done by himself, Vogel and DS Lewis.

Despite the progress since then, the iguana continues to face a number of threats, notably:

- * charcoal burning which also threatens their habitat;
- * predation of their young by cats and mongoose; and
- * predation of the adults of the species by dogs.

Still, conservation efforts persist, focussed, according to Wilson in his book, on "population monitoring, studies of the species' ecology, invasive predator control, and advocacy for habitat protection".

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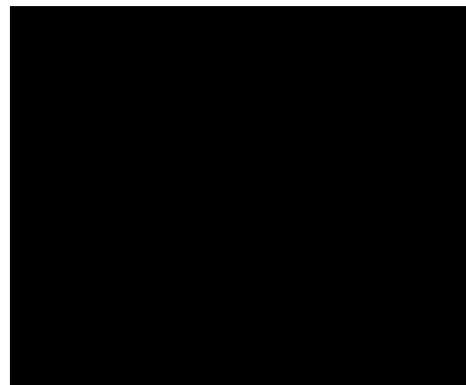
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The zoologist has predicted that in the absence of predator control and captive management efforts, the Jamaican iguana "would probably decline to extinction in the present century".

He has proposed that "the restoration of the Goat Islands through invasive species eradication and the subsequent reintroduction of the iguana" could solve the problem.

"Indeed, the re-establishment of an iguana population on these isolated off-shore cays is arguably the most decisive single action that can be taken to safeguard the species from extinction," writes Wilson. "Once carrying capacity is reached on the Goat Islands, this population can be used to supplement the existing headstart programme by providing individuals for translocation back into the Hellshire Hills. In conjunction with enhanced predator control efforts, this expanded reintroduction programme will be aimed at restoring natural iguana densities throughout the Hellshire Hills."

"Of course, this will only be possible if the remaining Hellshire forest is protected from charcoal burning and further development. The actualisation of habitat protection in the Hellshire Hills and the restoration of the Goat Islands, will be determined largely by issues of a political nature," the researcher added.



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