

'Green' invasion project gets funding

Cayman News

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(CNS): The government has allocated some \$200,000 from the Environmental Protection Fund in order to begin a major project to tackle the invasive green iguanas head on. The goal is to completely eradicate the iguanas from the Sister Islands, where the rogue reptile has been seen in small numbers for several years, and to make a dramatic reduction in the estimated 100,000 population in Grand Cayman, where the iguanas are now causing a multitude of problems, both economically and environmentally.

From the cost to the local power firm to wrap hundreds of transformer poles in an effort to limit the number that can get on the lines to the poisoning of pet dogs from the bacteria in the iguana meat, the proliferation of the invasive creatures is taking a serious toll. The Department of Environment said the National Conservation Council (NCC) Invasive Species Committee is currently working on a way forward to tackle the issue but a spokesperson from the department told CNS it was a "daunting task".

However, with some last minute juggling in Finance Committee last week, Environment Minister Wayne Panton confirmed that at least \$200,000 from an additional \$1.5M appropriation from the EPF will cover the costs of the research and possible solutions, including a possible bounty, but given the numbers there will not be a single solution to the problem.

"The priority is to eradicate the green iguana from the Sister Islands before it can get a footing on Little Cayman or Cayman Brac," Panton said. He told CNS that while the situation in Grand Cayman is beyond eradication, researchers believe there is still a chance to address the problem on the two smaller islands, where the numbers are still relatively low.

"We need to address that threat as quickly as possible," he said.

With no natural native predators – just dogs — their adaptation and proliferation on Grand Cayman has created a perfect storm. But Panton said the project would also focus on trying to reduce the massive population of well over 100,000 on Grand Cayman – almost double the amount of humans living here.

In December 2014, the Terrestrial Unit of the DoE and a US Fisheries and Wildlife representative completed the first island-wide population survey of the green iguanas and found the estimated population size of juvenile and adults, excluding hatchlings, could be as high as 152,000, though DoE Terrestrial Research Officer Jane Haakonsson explained that this was an initial pilot study and not definitive research.

"We don't yet have data about reproduction and survival to estimate population rate of change in births and deaths,"



Green iguana at the golf course, Grand Cayman



Invasive green iguana, which breeds prolifically on Grand Cayman

she said. “However, we suspect the population has increased in size given the high reproductive rate of these reptiles, and additional surveys this year will help establish a much better understanding of the growth of the population.”

Knowing the numbers would be very important for any control strategy to be effective, she said. The committee charged with coming up with ideas to tackle the reptilian scourge is chaired by world renowned iguana expert, Fred Burton, best known for his conservation work with Cayman’s own iconic blue iguana, which remains endangered.

The NCC is focusing on a major culling programme for Grand Cayman but trained tracker dogs could tackle the much lower numbers now present on the Sister Islands, which the DoE said needed much tighter border control measures to prevent more greens arriving there.

With several approaches and culling methods planned for Grand Cayman, DoE Deputy Director Tim Austin said the funding from the EPF would be critical to help determine what can actually work.

From paying culling teams to specialist equipment for disposal of carcasses and public outreach campaigns, he noted a number of logistical issues to address and the uncertainty of what can achieve the best results quickly and cost effectively.

The road kill, the damage to crops, flowers and plants, the faeces and the greens’ propensity to take a dip in people’s pools makes them a pest for everyone, but their negative impact goes beyond just being a nuisance.

CUC has confirmed that the firm is applying metal around the transformer poles to stop the greens from climbing them but a spokesperson said that still doesn’t prevent the reptiles from accessing the lines from nearby trees and buildings. The Engineering Services Department that records data regarding outages revealed that between 1 January 2014 and 31 May 2015, they had 61 outages caused by animals, affecting 16,355 customers. While frogs, birds and even snakes can be responsible, the iguanas are certainly adding to the power supply interruptions.

Meanwhile, the islands’ vets are also faced with growing numbers of pets, mostly dogs, that are brought to their surgeries, often very ill, because they have eaten the iguanas, which the dogs chase.

“Reptiles ingest all sorts of bacteria, such as salmonella and E.coli, as well as other very nasty bacteria,” said Dr Ioana Popescu from Island Veterinary Services. She urged dog owners to keep their pets away from the iguanas and told CNS that the surgery is seeing several sick dogs a day now that have eaten green iguana.

As Cayman faces an uphill task to deal with the proliferation of the green iguana, ironically in its native environment in the rain forests of northern Mexico, Central America, southern Brazil and some Caribbean islands it is listed as a protected species by CITES because of its scarcity in its original habitat and the pet trade in the United States.

Before a change to the local legislation in 2010, the greens could not be legally killed because they were inadvertently included in the law protecting Grand Cayman’s endemic and



truly endangered blue iguana and the rock iguana on Cayman Brac and Little Cayman. Now, however, green iguanas can be culled lawfully in the Cayman Islands without breaking any international treaties or local laws.

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