

REDISCOVERY OF THE JAMAICAN IGUANA

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The endemic Jamaican Iguana (*Cyclura collei*) belongs to the lizard subfamily *Iguaninae*, a group of 30 species of mostly large lizards which predominantly feed on plants. Other representatives of the subfamily include the Green Iguana (*Iguana iguana*) common in Central America and some of the islands of the Lesser Antilles, and the galapagos marine Iguana (*Amblyrhynchus cristatus*). The genus *Cyclura* is confined to the northern Caribbean comprising eight species in the Greater Antilles, the Bahamas, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and Anegada.

The Jamaican Iguana was believed to be extinct after a remnant population disappeared from Goat Island off the Hellshire Coast in the 1940's. However, Dr. Jeremy Woodley from the Department of Zoology at UWI was able to assert the survival of the iguanas in the Hellshire Hills. Following rumours, he contacted pig hunters who alleged that their dogs had killed such lizards occasionally. In 1970, he was able to retrieve the dried carcass of a large individual which was killed by dogs in 1969. A small number of alleged killings in the 1970's remained unconfirmed. A second individual was recovered alive by a pig hunter, Mr. Edwin Duffus in June 1990 (see photo). Subsequent trips to the area by concerned biologists and conservationists brought further proof of the continued survival of the species: a dead iguana presumably killed by dogs was found and a lizard was sighted.

A local *Cyclura collei* research and conservation group has been established as a result of the new findings. The group consists of representatives from the Department of Zoology at UWI (Peter Vogel, Jeremy Woodley), the Hope Zoo (Rhema Kerr), NRCDC (Yvette Strong) and the Institute of Jamaica (Lisa Henlin) as



The Jamaican Iguana (*Cyclura collei*) rediscovered at Hellshire

well as members with links to the private sector, the media and environmental voluntary organizations. Our long term goal is (1) to maintain or establish viable populations in protected natural habitats and (2) to establish captive breeding colonies. Presently, we are conducting a six week field survey in the Hellshire Hills pooling resources available at our institutions; the survey is supported by a generous grant from the World Wildlife Fund (USA). Results so far are promising. We have sighted several individuals, discovered apparent nesting sites and found a good number of lizard droppings.

Despite the fact that the Jamaican Iguana has survived in the Hellshire Hills, we must continue to consider the species as being on the brink of extinction. Mongooses and hunters' dogs take a heavy toll. More severely, the unique forests of Hellshire Hills are under extreme pressure especially from the east and north. A large number of charcoal

burners have intruded deep into the forest from the nearest roads and settlements and are rapidly degrading the natural habitats. In addition, development plans foresee roads and housing schemes in the heartland of the iguanas range. This would very probably lead to an almost complete destruction of the surrounding natural forests and the subsequent extinction of the remaining iguana population.

The completely harmless Jamaican Iguana has a very special place in our natural heritage. It belongs to a small group of spectacularly large herbivorous lizards. It is endemic to Jamaica and represents a genus restricted to the Caribbean. It is one of the largest Jamaican land animals reaching a length of up to about 120 cm (4 ft.). We sincerely appeal to all Jamaicans and all people interested in our natural heritage to support whatever conservation efforts are needed to save the unique Jamaican Iguana from extinction. □