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Headstart programme saving iguanas

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BY mid-March six iguanas raised in captivity, since the species was re-discovered in 1990, will be released to the wild, natural forest of the Hellshire Hills.

These iguanas were given a headstart – allowed to grow to a certain size in protected custody – then released when they are at a size where they are less vulnerable to the mongoose, one of the threats to the species survival. The mongoose preys on juvenile iguanas and hatchlings.

Dr. Peter Vogel, lecturer at the Zoology Department of the University of the West Indies, explains that the headstart programme is only one of many, adopted by the Jamaica Iguana Research and Conservation group, to protect this endangered species.

It is difficult to estimate the number of Jamaica Iguana still alive, maybe there are less than 50 adults, but as Dr. Vogel explained before 1990, the animal, endemic to Jamaica (meaning found nowhere else) was thought to be extinct. A remnant population of the iguana,

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Jamaica’s largest native land animal, disappeared in the 1940s. Hints of the animal’s survival were confirmed in 1970 when an iguana carcass was found.

It was a pig hunter, Edwin Duffus, who set the local and international scientific community abuzz when he carried a live iguana to the Hope Zoo. He discovered the animal while on one of his regular hunting trips for wild pigs in the Hellshire Hills. These hills, of unspoilt, largely undisturbed dry limestone forest, are now recognised as the last known remaining habitat for the iguana. The animals prefer to live far away from settlements.

Since the rediscovery in 1990, Dr. Vogel and his team had a five-week camp in the Hellshire Hills, they observed about 20 iguanas and two nesting sites.



“They need special conditions for nesting – a deep layer of soil so that they can dig into it; sunlit not shaded and it (the site) is used over and over again. It could be that by using it over and over again, the conditions of nesting are improved,” Dr. Vogel explained.

Depending on the size of the female, she can lay up to 20 eggs. She guards the nest for about 10 days to protect it from other females who might lay their eggs in the same nest.

While the mongoose is a threat to species survival, the greatest threat is mankind. Destruction of the animal’s natural habitat by charcoal burning is a reality. Dr. Vogel says that since 1991, he and his group have been imploring the burners not to go further south into the Hellshire Hills where the animals live.

There are also development plans since 1960, by the Hellshire Development Company, a subsidiary of the UDC that could cut into the natural habitat.

“Nobody doubts that Jamaica needs more houses... but I am saying there is no need to build these houses in the last primary forest. There are lots of areas of under-utilised lands where houses could be built,” Dr. Vogel said.

Dogs coming from the nearby settlement and carried into the forest by the charcoal burners and pig hunters are also a threat to species’ survival.

To ensure that the species is conserved for posterity, Dr. Vogel, with the cooperation of the Hope Zoo and several zoos in the United States, have been breeding the animals in captivity. The first 12 iguanas were exported two years ago and another 12 will be exported later this year.

“We also have a specialist doing genetic study in Texas... all the iguanas taken in captivity are being studied to make sure there is no inbreeding,” he said.

(Tomorrow : It’s illegal to have a pet iguana)