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The day I met Godzilla...

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Fred Burton heads a mission in the British Overseas Territory of the Cayman Islands to rescue the iconic Grand Cayman Blue Iguana from extinction. His story is a rare thing in conservation: success on a shoestring.

Fred, who is a member of IUCN's Iguana Specialist Group, has lived in Grand Cayman since 1979 and for the past nine years has been Director of the Blue Iguana Recovery Programme (BIRP). In small islands limited resources can often push individuals to shoulder a wide variety of responsibilities and develop diverse expertise. Fred is no exception.

A key player in protected areas planning, the conservation of parrots, seabirds and threatened plants and their habitats, Fred's palette of experience is typically varied. Amongst this body of work, however, Fred is best known for his achievements with the Blue Iguana—unsalaried and reliant on grant-funding and the support of local and international organizations and volunteers. Fred is literally saving a species from the jaws of extinction—and succeeding where million-dollar initiatives can fail.

"The day I met Godzilla... curiosity set in," recalls Fred.

Godzilla, in this case, was a six foot, sky-blue lizard with crimson eyes: a Grand Cayman Blue Iguana (*Cyclura lewisi*). Confronted by this remarkable animal, and knowing it to be unique to Cayman, Fred determined to discover all that he could about it. He learned that in 1940, the species was already on the brink of extinction with no more than a dozen individuals remaining.

Not one to shrink from a challenge, Fred was prepared to give near-extinction a 50-year head-start, but he was not about to let extinction win this particular race.

"1988 was a pivotal year. It was the moment the Cayman Islands Government recognized there was a need to help the Blue Iguanas. It was also the year a law was passed, establishing the National Trust for the Cayman Islands. By 1990, the newly-formed Trust had been given the authority to launch a conservation program for the Grand Cayman Blue Iguana, and I, as a government employee and Trust volunteer, agreed to manage it – in my spare time."

From inception, Fred has planned and developed every aspect of the recovery effort. No job was too small, too menial or too overwhelming. From humble beginnings feeding and watering hungry iguanas, incubating eggs in his study at home, preparing food and constructing field equipment and iguana houses on the floor of his kitchen, Fred dedicated himself, his time and the personal property to the programme.

It soon became apparent, however, that part time conservation efforts would not be able to keep pace with the mounting pressures of habitat loss in this rapidly-developing country: residential subdivisions, hotels and road networks were springing up to accommodate the demands of a population which was doubling every 10 years. And with the people came the rats, the cats and the dogs – working their way insidiously into the few remaining areas of otherwise untouched habitat.

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Gorgeous George - a Grand Cayman Blue Iguana
Photo: Fred Burton



Fred Burton bags an iguana to weigh and measure it
Photo: Fred Burton



Fred speaks at a fundraiser at the House of Commons in London
Photo: Fred Burton

In 2002 an island-wide survey showed the wild population had hit an all-time low: 10-25 individuals. The Blue Iguana was functionally extinct in the wild. Suddenly the individuals in the captive breeding programme took on a new significance.

"... there was a sense that it all might be too late."

Fred bid goodbye to his post as Environmental Programme Manager with the National Trust to return to his volunteer roots and dedicate 100% of his time to the Blue Iguanas.

In addition to tackling the basics of practical conservation management, Fred juggled his time between research and a punishing schedule of desk and fieldwork. He determined the taxonomy, behaviour, feeding, breeding and habitat requirements of the Blues, publishing the paper recognizing their status as a species in 2004.

As the programme grew, Fred reached out to local and international organizations and individuals to help with the development of a comprehensive Conservation Action Plan for the species. This addresses all aspects of the recovery, from the expansion of the captive breeding facility, to fundraising, public outreach and the development of educational programmes for local schools.

Learning through doing is central to the success of BIRP – providing a platform for local and international volunteers to come together under "Team Blue" initiatives; feeding animals and cleaning cages, helping with survey work, targeted research, educational initiative and reserves management.

Fred is a modest individual, and would be the first to point out the essential role played by his many project partners; however all of these partners would agree that, if there was no Fred Burton there would be no Blue Iguanas.

For the past five years, the programme has annually hatched and head-started in excess of 100 individuals per year, each one tagged and released into strategic sites in the protected areas around Grand Cayman. In 2006 the first breeding of head-started iguanas in the wild was confirmed. In 2011 the BIRP achieved its long-term core objective of establishing a dedicated reserve in the wild: the Colliers Wilderness Reserve in East End provides some 190 acres of habitat, with the potential to support some 500 free-roaming iguanas. Dry shrubland is a biodiverse but uncharismatic conservation cause, and without the impetus for the preservation of the Blues it is difficult to see how such a reserve might otherwise have been established. With this achievement comes the switch in the initiative, from captive breeding to a focus on maintaining the newly-establishing population in the wild.

This is not a happy ending, but perhaps it is the beginning of a happy ending.

"... pushing forward with determined optimism and a science-based conservation strategy has achieved an improbable turnaround in a very short time, and at an exceptionally low cost thanks to extensive networking and heavy reliance on volunteers and partnering institutions."

Once the most endangered rock iguana on earth, the Blue Iguana is now on the road to recovery, and using its charismatic status as a flagship for habitat preservation.

Despite the lofty achievements of the BIRP, some things remain the same. A visit to Fred's house is still likely to turn up a volunteer, a scientist or photographer from an international magazine. During hurricanes it is an evacuation shelter for Team Blue. In fair weather it is a film studio. Hatchlings are still processed in the bathroom and there is usually an experiment going on in the garden.

In 2007 Fred was awarded an MBE for services in conservation of endangered species. He lives in Grand Cayman, with his

understanding wife.

For further information: www.Bluelguana.ky

SERVICES



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