

## 20 years of conservation success for the Jamaican Iguana

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The recovery of the **Jamaican Iguana** (*Cyclura collei*) is considered one of the greatest success stories in conservation science. Presumed extinct since the 1940s, a tiny population was discovered in 1990, in the remote tropical dry forest of the Hellshire Hills in southern Jamaica. This discovery inspired the formation of the IUCN SSC Iguana Specialist Group, which has worked with local conservation partners over the past 20 years to increase the wild population of Jamaican Iguana. Since 1991, the number of nesting females and annual hatchlings recorded has increased over six-fold, with at least 200 individuals in the wild today.

Listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™ the Jamaican Iguana population has been decimated by a combination of habitat loss and predation by invasive alien species. Agricultural and urban development, together with timber extraction for charcoal production, has degraded and fragmented the Jamaican Iguana's tropical dry forest habitat. Where habitat is still in prime condition, dogs, feral cats, and wild pigs prevent the iguana's persistence, impacting the whole forest ecosystem. Their tropical dry forest home of the Hellshire Hills is one of the most endangered ecosystems in the world, and among the most extensive in the Caribbean. Forest health depends on the iguana; it feeds on fruits and flowers and helps the germination of seeds and their dispersal, thereby benefiting many other species in the forest.

The Jamaican Iguana is genetically unique, an indication that it has long been isolated from its closest relatives: the **Anegada Rock Iguana** (*Cyclura pinguis*) and the **Grand Cayman Blue Iguana** (*Cyclura lewisi*). These iguanas face similar threats, although the Jamaican Iguana also has to contend with the **Indian Mongoose** (*Herpestes javanicus*) which was introduced to Jamaica in the late 1800s. The mongoose is no match for an adult iguana, but is a voracious predator of eggs and juveniles.

Today, Jamaicans can be proud of the fact that their largest native land vertebrate is making a comeback. Before the reintroduction of sub-adult iguanas and the implementation of a mongoose trapping program, juveniles and hatchlings were never seen. Still a highly conservation-dependent species, the Jamaican Iguana has benefited from the Jamaican government's commitment to the Convention on Biological Diversity, as well as the resources provided by numerous international zoos and donors. However, the Jamaican Iguana recovery program is now at a major cross-roads.

The potential for large-scale development in the Portland Bight Protected Area, which includes the only existing wild population of Jamaican Iguana, would prevent a key objective in the long-term survival of the species - establishing a safe second population of iguanas on the Goat Islands. This reintroduction is outlined as a priority action in the Jamaican Iguana Species Recovery Plan, which has now been published by the IUCN SSC Iguana Specialist Group. This plan will be an invaluable tool in the next stages of conserving this enduring symbol of Jamaican biodiversity.

"Together with our Jamaican partners, we described action steps for nine objectives in the Species Recovery Plan that will ensure the recovery of the Jamaican Iguana." says Tandora Grant, Red List Authority Coordinator and Programme Officer of the IUCN SSC Iguana

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[Jamaican Iguana Species Recovery Plan, 2006 - 2013](#)

[IUCN SSC Iguana Specialist Group](#)



Jamaican Iguana (*Cyclura collei*)  
Photo: Rick Van Veen



A female Jamaican Iguana in a tree  
Photo: Rick Van Veen



An Indian mongoose stealing an iguana egg from a nest  
Photo: Rick Van Veen



Jamaican Iguana (*Cyclura collei*) - juvenile in tree  
Photo: Rick Van Veen



Hope Zoo keeper releasing a head-started Jamaican Iguana  
Photo: Tandora Grant

Specialist Group. "We are looking forward to meeting again in Kingston, 20 years after our first conservation planning workshop for the iguana. Our specialist group has its roots in that first meeting."

The IUCN SSC Iguana Specialist Group will share the Jamaican Iguana Species Recovery Plan at their annual meeting, due to take place on 14-15 November, in Kingston, Jamaica.

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