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- BioBlitz
- Cat Watch
- Explorers Journal
- Ocean Views
- Polar Bear Watch
- Rising Star Expedition
- Voice for Elephants
- Water Currents
- Fulbright National Geographic Stories

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**Iguana Research on Gaulin Cay, Bahamas**

Posted by **Shedd Aquarium** of John G. Shedd Aquarium on August 2, 2013

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ACCA participants search for elusive rock iguanas on Gaulin Cay, Bahamas. (Image credit: Shedd Aquarium / Laura Lytle)

The final installment in a series of posts by Chicago area college students enrolled in the John G. Shedd Aquarium's Marine and Island Ecology course offered through the Associated Colleges of the Chicago Area (ACCA). Our students work closely with Shedd staff through both field work and onsite classes. At the end of the course, students fly into Nassau to live aboard Shedd's 80-foot research vessel, the R/V Coral Reef II, in the Exuma Islands, Bahamas. Read the first and second stories.

This is Jami Shawmeker, a participant in Shedd Aquarium's Marine and Island Ecology ACCA program. Near the start of the field trip portion of our college program, ACCA students in the Marine and Island Ecology class traveled to Gaulin Cay, Bahamas to meet Shedd Aquarium's Vice President of Conservation and Research, Dr. Chuck Knapp. Our goal for the day: study some iguanas!

Dr. Knapp has studied the population dynamics of Bahamian rock iguanas for nearly 20 years. Over time, the data Dr. Knapp collects can provide an overall estimate of the cay's iguana population, as well as an idea of individual iguana growth rates and survivorship. By studying the



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same remote populations for many years, we can more easily identify the threats that feral animals, human interference, and other factors pose to iguanas.

This year, we had the chance to work side-by-side with Dr. Knapp to process and release the iguanas. Let me tell you, it was an experience. The biggest thing we had to learn was teamwork. We typically worked in groups of five. If someone spotted an iguana, we all stopped, and the spotter began to direct us towards the animal so it could be captured safely and humanely. Once we captured an iguana, we had to transfer the animal back to our base camp, placing it in a pillowcase to keep it cool and calm. My first iguana was one of my favorite memories: the entire team felt a rush of adrenaline and excitement, and a sense of pride at our accomplishment.

On Gaulin Cay, a portion of the island is covered in a low, tangled forest of buttonwood trees. Once an iguana reaches the forest, it's nearly impossible to catch. When we spotted an iguana right on the edge of the trees, everyone stopped cold. Slowly, we began to circle the iguana. We weren't sure that we would succeed, but we were able to capture it just before he took off into the forest. Through teamwork, we beat the odds.



The author carefully holds a rock iguana for its examination. (Image credit: Shedd Aquarium / Laura Lytle)

Back at base camp, we processed each iguana. As a kid, I spent my time watching any show that taught me about conservation and animals—so when I could help Dr. Knapp, this animal-loving girl from small-town Illinois was over the moon. We scanned each iguana for its PIT tag, an identification device similar to the ones used in cats or dogs. We took blood and tick samples, physically examined the iguana, then marked and released it.

ACCA classes have contributed to Dr. Knapp's research for many years. Together, we can help promote conservation in the Bahamas. I saw this firsthand on Gaulin Cay, where we met a group of tourists—a huge part of the Bahamian economy. The tour participants were extremely interested in learning more about our work. By connecting with us, they learned firsthand how feeding and

human interactions are affecting the iguana population. They seemed to really take that message home, and I believe they will continue to spread the word. That alone will help promote conservation: people want to protect the things they know and love.

This trip was a once in a lifetime experience that I will treasure. I never thought I'd have the opportunity to be part of a research trip that has direct effects on an endangered species. My dream is to become a vet, but in the future I will also try to participate in more research and conservation trips. I have always wanted to work with animals; after this trip, I know that's where I'm meant to be.

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