

Jamaican Iguana fighting for survival

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IN two months, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)-Iguana Specialist Group (ISG) will mark the 20th anniversary of the Jamaica Iguana Recovery Plan, touted by scientists to be among the most recognised conservation success stories in the world. But given the recent current of Government rhetoric on the possibility of siting a port on Goat Islands, there might not be much to celebrate.

Goat Islands are two cays off the St Catherine coast which are among some 15 or so counted in the Portland Bight Protected Area (PBPA). They were to be the crowning of the recovery effort — a predator-free iguana sanctuary. Under the recovery effort, researchers removed hatchlings of the endangered Jamaican iguana, believed extinct since the 1940s, reared them in captivity, then repatriated the adults to the Hellshire Hills, also part of the Portland Bight.



This Jamaican iguana, photographed at Hope Zoo, is part of the headstart programme which rears the endangered species in captivity and repatriates it to its natural habitat once it's big enough to fend off predators. (PHOTO: BRYAN CUMMINGS)



1/2



Close to 200 of the reptiles have been returned over the years, with conservationists here and abroad singing the praises of the initiative which has been supported financially and in technical terms by the International Iguana Foundation, Jamaica's Hope Zoo, in partnership with the Fort Worth Zoo in Texas, San Diego Zoo Global, and a string of others in the US.

"The effort has provided hope and inspiration that a species once considered extinct cannot only be saved but put on the road to recovery," vice-president of Conservation and Research at John G Shedd Aquarium in the US, Dr Charles Knapp told the Jamaica Observer yesterday.

Not only would port development erode those gains, he argued, it would also send a "clear but unfortunate message" to the global conservation and donor communities.

"Unfortunately, the message would be that an investment in Jamaica is unwise, that protected area designations do not matter, and that commercial interests supersede national heritage. We do not advocate against economic development. We only urge the Government to consider alternative sites to ensure the protection of a truly unique area, which is already

recognised

and technically protected," he said.

"If the port project is approved," he added, "the recovery of the Jamaican Iguana will be in severe jeopardy."

The issue is dear to Dr Knapp not only for scientific reasons. He told the Observer that his decision to pursue graduate degrees and the study of iguanas was a direct result of his participation in the inaugural meeting of the IUCN in 1993 and the rediscovery of the Jamaican Iguana.

"This issue resonates personally with me," he said in the e-mail exchange.

Knapp and five of his colleagues penned their concerns in a letter to the newspaper. Though members of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, they did not speak on behalf of the organisation as they did not request permission to do so ahead of time.

Those who co-signed the letter were Dr Allison Alberts, chief conservation and research officer at San Diego Zoo Global and president of the International Iguana Foundation (IIF); Dr Stesha Pasachnik, postdoctoral research associate at San Diego Zoo Global; Tandora Grant senior research coordinator at San Diego Zoo Global; Dr Glenn Gerber, scientist at San Diego Zoo Global and Mike Fouraker, executive director of Fort Worth Zoo, president of Caribbean Wildlife Alliance and treasurer of the IIF.

They will be part of the group at the annual working meeting in Kingston from November 11-16, 2013, which will be co-hosted by the University of the West Indies, whose Dr Byron Wilson heads the Jamaican Iguana Recovery Group. The meeting will follow a two-day workshop to be hosted by Hope Zoo and NEPA.

The swirling controversy involving Goat Islands and the PBPA arose in recent weeks when the Government of Jamaica indicated during a meeting in Beijing with Chinese investors, that the cays were being considered for the location of a trans-shipment port. Local environmentalists have stoutly opposed such a move, arguing that it is in contravention of the protected area order issued for PBPA in 1999. Civil society groups have argued, too, that Government's utterances flew in the face of the social partnership agreement signed on July 31, as no dialogue or consultation on the subject has taken place.

In defence of its position, different Members of Parliament, including Robert Pickersgill and Omar Davies have maintained that the port, which is expected to take advantage of the widening of the Panama Canal, will create jobs for the Jamaican workforce, and will therefore dent the unemployment rate currently at 16 per cent.

But it can't be jobs at any cost, according to the conservationists.

"While we recognise the right and the need for Jamaicans to increase employment opportunities, we are concerned about the impact on this environmentally sensitive area. The PBPA is considered globally important because of the unique habitats and species that are represented within its boundaries. As such, the international conservation and donor communities have collectively invested millions of dollars to assist with local efforts to help save the Jamaican Iguana and the Hellshire Hills, both found only within the PBPA," the letter said.

It continued: "Aside from missing a fabulous opportunity to save several of Jamaica's iconic endemic species, and capitalise on a potentially lucrative and sustainable eco-tourism venture, the port development would almost certainly destroy the surrounding marine environment, including recently declared fish sanctuaries."

The possibility of the port aside, the Hellshire Hills, one of the last intact dry forest habitats in the world, is under threat because of charcoal burning. That was one of the challenges to which Dr Wilson referred in 2012 when he reported to the IUCN that: "We are fighting a tough battle here in Jamaica, but one we do not intend to lose. Last year (2011) we recorded a record number of nesting iguanas - three times as many as when the project started in 1991, and over half of those were repatriated headstarters. However, we must

keep up the fight, because otherwise the iguana will drift into extinction."

For Fouraker, who has visited the Hellshire Hills with the UWI research team in support of the project up to three times a year over the last 20, the Jamaican Iguana represents one of the most compelling animal stories of modern times.

"In addition to Fort Worth staff providing consultation on field biology work, veterinary services for animals that are to be returned to the wild," he said, "my primary role is finding monetary support for the Jamaican projects (which the UWI scientists run). Besides iguana, these projects include, American crocodiles, sea turtles, botany, frogs, and a variety of other animals".