



## ENVIRONMENT

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### Zoo repatriation programme to be expanded

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SOME endangered species at Hope Zoo are getting closer to life outside of captivity, thanks to a US\$50,000 grant from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Small Grants Programme implemented by the United Nations Development Fund (UNDP).

Currently, the zoo is home to over 16 species of reptiles, 11 of mammals, and 40 species of birds. Of those, the Jamaican iguana, the yellow snake, the Jamaican coney, the Jamaican owl, and the yellow-and black-billed parrot are found only in Jamaica. Though they all face various degrees of threat, the iguanas are the most vulnerable, the zoo's curator Orlando Robinson told the Jamaica Observer.

The iguanas are already on a repatriation programme which releases them into the wild after a period of time. That programme will now be expanded to include other key species.

At the unveiling for a new biodiversity facility at the zoo last Friday, executive chairman of the Hope Zoo Preservation Foundation Kenneth Benjamin said as much.

"The zoo... was an important partner in a successful conservation mission that helped save our

indigenous iguanas from extinction and which has received international acclaim. After being discovered in 1991, our iguana programme led to the release/repatriation of some 174 animals and a four-fold increase in the number of nesting females, some of which were head starters.

"But we recognise that more can be done, that more needs to be done. Thanks to this contribution from GEF, I can confidently say that more will be done. Graduating from that iguana project, the focus is now on expanding the zoo's scope of involvement to include other endemic species which are critically endangered or threatened," he said.

The grant will be used to expand the zoo's biodiversity programme by establishing sanctuaries for protected flora and fauna. It will feature a research facility and an area to house rescued animals. It won't be open to the general public, but will facilitate educational tours.

The primary goals of the biodiversity project are to improve husbandry standards for key local species, and to promote awareness among Jamaicans about the need to protect biodiversity.

"These are initial steps to preserving natural heritage," said chief technical director in the Ministry of Water, Land, Environment and Climate Change, Lt Col Oral Khan at Friday's launch. Khan brought remarks on behalf of the minister, Robert Pickersgill.

Man, he said, had become the bane of the earth, decimating much of its natural habitats in the name of development.

"Over the last 50 years, the amount of carbon dioxide in the air has increased by 33 1/3 per cent. In the next 50 years it will increase at a much faster rate, perhaps even double," said Khan.

Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries Roger Clarke, who gave the keynote address, expressed amazement at the progress of the renovations to the zoo and lauded the expansion of the biodiversity project.

"Not only are we going to develop the zoo, but even more important is the educational aspect of it, which will bring the people here, teach the people that it is in their interest that we must preserve our biodiversity. It is a part of our heritage and it must remain so," he said.

Clarke said he was happy that a proposal, some years ago, to construct houses on the zoo lands was dismissed and praised Benjamin for spearheading the preservation effort. It was a shining example, he said, of public/private partnerships.

"With the level of degradation that had set in, someone had to step in and it couldn't have been the Government," said Clarke.

The renovation of Hope Zoo started in earnest in April 2011. It is a collaborative effort of the Hope Zoo Preservation Foundation and Guardsman Group, both of which Benjamin head.

"I think it's very important and it's a very good look for the future," Michael Fouraker said of the expansion of the biodiversity programme.

Fouraker is executive director of Fort Worth Zoo in the United States, which has been partnering with Hope for the past 20 years. He is affiliated with the International Iguana Foundation and the Caribbean Wildlife Alliance.

"The iguana pens were built back in 1984, and they've survived several hurricanes, and that work and the research that go on here is the reason they've survived. Over 100 animals have been raised here and have been taken back out into the wild and some are now breeding," he told the Observer.

Jamaica ranks fifth in the world for its endemic species, boasting over 8,000 species of plants and animals. The country has more than 6,000 species of flowering plants, including ferns and lichens, of which 28 per cent are endemic; 120 species of butterflies; 19 species of frogs; 113 species of breeding birds; 100 species of migratory birds; and 22 species of mammals.

Resident representative of the UNDP Dr Arun Kashyap said the project underscores the UNDP's commitment to working with partners to identify and implement appropriate interventions that satisfy Jamaica's development needs.

"The project supports our overarching goals of achieving the targets of the Millennium Development Goals and ensuring that there is sustainable development beyond 2015," he said. "The assistance being given to Jamaica will help to further put the country on a path to realising the Vision 2030 Development Plan."

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