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For sale: Cayman's endangered iguanas

Exotic pet trade highlights bizarre threat to local species

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The endangered Grand Cayman blue iguana.

Rare Cayman species, including Brac rock iguanas and Cayman blue iguanas, are being traded in online exotic pet forums.

Grand Cayman blues are on sale for \$1,500 while rock iguanas are available for \$300. The site claims they were bred in captivity and the Department of Environment says it has no reason to believe the iguanas are not ancestors of animals exported legally in the distant past.

But the DoE says the high value of endangered species to enthusiasts means vigilance is required to ensure no illegal exports are attempted.

Controls on taking rare iguanas already exist through the Animals Law.

John Bothwell, senior research officer with the Department of Environment, said those being traded online are probably not illegal exports.

But he believes the exotic animal trade is one reason why other Cayman species, including rare snakes, frogs and lizards, may need protection under the proposed National Conservation Bill.

Websites including Fauna Classifieds and HerpNut offer rare Cayman Brac iguanas to pet owners. The blue iguanas, also for sale on HerpNut, are offered to institutions only.

The ad reads: "For the first time ever we may be able to offer a small number of male captive hatched Grand Cayman Blue iguanas from zoo bred and hatched stock in the fall of 2013. This is one of the rarest Cyclura iguanas in the world and only a few hundred animals are believed to still exist in the wild. California sales only on this U.S. listed endangered species."

Mr. Bothwell said of the iguanas being sold online, "We can't say that the iguanas were exported illegally since we don't know when or how they left the island. The parent stock could be quite old or these could even be second generation animals. We just don't know."

He said the trade in endangered species was a concern, but the only way to address it in Cayman was to protect species locally. "You will note on the HerpNut website that a

Grand Cayman blue iguana can retail for \$1,495. It is this high value on endangered species that has required vigilance by the Department of Agriculture in recent years to make sure that no illegal exports are attempted.

"The iguanas already overseas are beyond our practical remit. We are concerned with protecting the animals in Cayman as the most important and most practical thing that we can do to preserve the species locally."

He added, "As the iguanas are now well outside of Cayman's jurisdiction, and doubtless have been so for many years, local legislation has no bearing on them and that will not change under the National Conservation Law."

What the law does do is allow government to try to protect endangered or endemic species which may be at risk, not just from poachers but from development or destruction of their habitats.

Mr. Bothwell said the threat of poaching could not be dismissed, highlighting an incident involving a group of German visitors who were stopped at the airport in Grand Cayman several years ago attempting to export a collection of endemic frogs and lizards they had gathered in Cayman.

The National Conservation Law will tighten up regulations by potentially preventing the

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The National Conservation Law will tighten up regulations by primarily preventing the collection and export of certain species.

“The ‘German incident’ was the collection of other native species such as lizards and frogs which are not protected under the Animals Law but which are attractive to herpetologists abroad because of their rarity,” Mr. Bothwell said. “For most of our animals and all of our endemic plant species, there is still no protection from collection.

“All that Cayman can do is remain vigilant that collected species are not exported without permits. As you can imagine, from a species management perspective, that is less than ideal, especially for some of our particularly rare species, of which there may only be a handful left in the wild.

“The new law will give Cayman the power to protect our endangered species in the wild, where they need to remain. This will be through the conservation plans that will involve public input. For our most endangered species, it is hoped that the public will agree that they need to be protected from being taken from the wild.”

Green iguana threat

Meanwhile, rock iguanas on Cayman Brac are facing a more pressing threat – from invasive green iguanas. The Department of Environment is asking Brac residents to report all sightings of the green iguanas so they can be removed amid concerns that they will compete for food and habitat with the much rarer rock iguanas.

The warning comes after a member of the public spotted a hatchling in the Spot Bay Area – the first concrete evidence that there is a breeding population of green iguanas on the island.

“Green iguanas are very invasive, and pose a serious threat to the island’s wildlife because of their size, feeding habits, and high reproduction rates,” said DOE Research Officer Jessica Harvey.

Brac residents are advised to contact DOE officers Erbin Tibbetts or Robert Walton if they see a green iguana. They can be reached at 926-0136 or 926-2342.

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