

**News story****Smuggled iguanas returned home by Border Force**

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Twelve critically endangered iguanas seized by Border Force at Heathrow have been returned to their native Bahamas.



The iguanas arrive for their flight

Twelve critically endangered iguanas seized from smugglers by Border Force officers at London's Heathrow Airport have been returned home to their native Bahamas.

The reptiles were discovered in the baggage of Romanian nationals Angla-Alina Bitu, and Vitora-Oliva Bucsa on 3 February 2014 by staff carrying out customs checks.

The iguanas were each wrapped in an individual sock and had been stuffed into suitcases. Twelve survived their journey but one died in transit.

They were identified as San Salvador rock iguanas, a species so rare that only a few hundred are known to be in existence. As such they are controlled under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) (<http://www.cites.org/>).

**Jailed**

The women were later sentenced to 12 months in prison for smuggling, after an investigation by the UK's National Crime Agency (NCA) (<http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/>).

The iguanas were stuffed into socks when they were smuggled



Following the seizure, officers from Border Force's specialist CITES team worked with the Bahamas High Commission (<http://www.bahamashclondon.net/>) in London to arrange their return to their native islands.

On Wednesday 9 July the iguanas were taken from the City of London Corporation's Animal Reception Centre at Heathrow (<http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/harc>) to board a British Airways flight to Nassau, accompanied by two Border Force officers, for their journey.

They were then transported to a government research station on the island of San Salvador where they will be monitored by experts, with the eventual aim of retuning them to the wild.

## **Bahamas**

Grant Miller, head of the Border Force CITES team, said:

“ We were in contact with the Bahamas High Commission in London from an early stage and straight away it became clear that getting them back to their natural habitat was going to be really important.

Arranging the repatriation of such rare animals is complex and sensitive, but I'm delighted that through our close work with the Bahamian authorities, British Airways, the City of London Corporation and other partners we have succeeded.

Not only has Border Force made sure that the criminals responsible for smuggling these animals are behind bars, we're also proud to have been able to play a part in safeguarding the future of this species."

## **Wildlife crime**

The Bahamas Minister of The Environment, The Honourable Kenred Dorsett, said:

" Wildlife crime is a global problem, which only collectively we can address. This crime plagues animals and plants particularly, like the case of the Bahamian iguanas, species which are extremely rare and from remote places.

We thank the government of the UK for their excellent cooperation as they have gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure the successful repatriation of these animals and we look forward to working with other countries as well as local, regional and international NGOs to address the challenge."

The iguanas were flown in the cabin of a British Airways flight to Nassau. Pilot Captain Al Matthews said:

" Naturally, all of our customers are special, but despite having flown Prime Ministers and members of the Royal Family, these iguanas are by far the most unusual.

You don't expect to share your cabin with incredibly rare reptiles. However, I can confirm all the iguanas were securely stored throughout the flight and had the most comfortable journey possible."

The iguanas were housed at the Heathrow Animal Reception Centre



## Endangered

Robbie Marsland, UK Director of International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) (<http://www.ifaw.org>), said:

“ With wildlife crime having such a devastating impact on many endangered animals, this is an excellent demonstration of successful enforcement work by Border Force and the NCA.

We are pleased that the criminals involved have been brought to justice and that these critically endangered animals have been returned home to live out their lives in their natural habitat. Wildlife belongs in the wild.”

Border Force is responsible for frontline detection and seizure duties on the illegal trade in endangered animals and plants which is covered by the CITES convention. The convention covers more than 35,000 species of animals and plants, whether they are traded as live specimens or as derivatives.

The iguanas were given special dispensation to fly in the cabin



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