



Cayman Islands blue iguana

(CNS): The Cayman Islands endangered blue iguana may have stepped back from the brink of extinction as a result of the incredible work of Blue Iguana Recovery Programme (BIRP) Director Fred Burton but the iconic creature needs more support to secure its future as the threats it faces are increasing faster than conservation measures can protect them. Researchers say BIRP needs to transition into a more permanent management project if the blues have any chance of future survival, which will require more cash.

Experts have warned that the feral population of domestic cats and dogs, plus the growth in traffic and habitat loss because of unsustainable development are making it impossible for the recovering blue iguana population to ever be viable without human intervention, despite the success of the work headed by Burton.

As we approach 2016 and the world renowned conservation programme's target of having '1,000 in the wild' by the end of that year, the endangered iguana finds itself further away from that goal than ever as surviving in the wild unassisted is an ever more elusive goal. Researches said blue iguanas only know how to instinctively avoid native predators, such as the Cayman racer snake, but the increase in threats which have not historically existed in the Cayman Islands and which the reptiles do not recognise or fear continue to place their independent survival in jeopardy.

"The only reason the population appears steady at the moment is because the BIRP continues to head-start and release iguanas into the wild," said Jane Haakonsson, the Department of Environment's Terrestrial Officer. "This means that we are simply replacing the individuals that have succumbed to the increased threats, and this is not a sustainable long term plan."

After careful monitoring and assessment, BIRP has concluded that the success of a viable blue iguana population in the wild will require active management into the indefinite future.

"The programme now needs to consider threat-management and mitigation measures that it had not previously contemplated and will therefore require additional funding for materials and to continue to employ staff to carry out these measures," researchers said in a release about the need to raise more cash.

BIRP now plans a range of commercial activities to generate the money needed alongside ongoing education and awareness effort to ensure the continued involvement and support by the local community. This past weekend, proceeds from the Jurassic World Movie Premiere went directly to the BIRP as a result of support from law firm, Walkers, a long time sponsor of the programme, which helped fund the pre-showing cocktails and hors d'oeuvre party before a private screening of the film at Regal Cinemas.

"We need the continued support of individual and corporate donors now, more than ever, to help us meet the new challenges the BIRP is facing so that all of the hard work done to date isn't wasted and to ensure that this species doesn't become extinct on our watch," said National Trust Director Christina Pineda. "We are grateful for the corporate sponsors, such as Walkers, who have responded quickly to the urgent funding needs we are facing."

Walkers Senior Partner Mark Lewis said the struggles of Cayman's indigenous blues are well documented.

“We at Walkers feel a genuine sense of duty, and pride, being part of the success story of the Blue Iguana Recovery Programme. So much so, that the blue iguana has become an integral part of the culture of Walkers, featuring very much in our branding and external marketing. The Blue Iguana Recovery Programme remains one of the key community projects that Walkers endorses and supports in every way we can,” he added.

However, if the project is to be properly sustained and the international success story of the blues’ rescue from extinction as a result of Burton’s work, the programme will need even more support from the community in future.

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