

Shedd researcher helped in rescue of critically endangered rock iguanas



One of two rare Exuma Island rock iguanas are now on display at the SHedd Aquarium after being rescued from the illegal exotic pet trade. | Shedd Aquarium |

The newest residents of the Shedd Aquarium aren't young and pretty, don't have names and don't even live in the water, but they are critically endangered and were rescued from smugglers by one of the lakefront museum's researchers.

The male and female Exuma Island rock iguanas, more than 20 years old, had been smuggled out of their native Bahamas and sold for profit to an illegal pet dealer in Florida in 1994, a statement from the Shedd said. The species is among the world's most endangered lizards, partly because of the exotic pet trade.

Dr. Chuck Knapp, Shedd's vice president of conservation and research, had spent 20 years researching the endangered reptiles, and "genetic data collected for his research efforts was used at trial in the legal case against the smugglers, who were later convicted," according to the aquarium.

A total of nine rock iguanas, including the Shedd's pair, were originally confiscated in Fort Meyers, Fla., in March 1998 by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agents after they were found on a "price list." They were then sent to live at the Los Angeles Zoo.

Only 2,000 of the animals remain in the wild, "at extreme risk of extinction due to limited range and population sizes, along with illegal hunting, smuggling for the pet trade, and the effects of intense tourism pressure and associated food provisioning," according to the Shedd.

Since 1994, Knapp has "worked with the Bahamian government and Bahamian National Trust to conduct research that has helped with regulation, training and outreach, and citizen-science data collection and field programs to save

them, according to the Shedd.

The iguanas, the largest native herbivores on the islands, “play a vital ecological role by regulating plant communities in the dry forests and scrub habitats that they inhabit” and their steep decline “threatens these communities and other species that occupy these habitats,” the statement said.

“Without action, future visitors to Bahamian islands may find themselves experiencing an unrecognizable and artificial landscape, paradise no longer,” Knapp said in the statement. “These magnificent animals can be 4 feet long and weigh over 20 pounds, yet they are no match for human impacts. It is our responsibility to continue our conservation research to protect them.”

“Reintroducing rescued iguanas back into their natural habitat is challenging because it often requires placing them onto a different island to minimize the spread of potential diseases,” he said. “Shedd scientists work regularly with the Bahamian government to provide genetic data and results from ongoing research to support those efforts.”

Until then, the new arrivals can be viewed at the aquarium’s Islands and Lakes gallery.



The Exuma Island rock iguanas is one of the world’s most critically endangered lizards, and two of them can now be seen at Shedd Aquarium. | Shedd Aquarium