



## A New Lease On Life For Endangered "Neon Dragons" of Fiji 2015 May 15 th

Mataqali Vunaivi of Yanuya Village in the Mamanuca Island group, are welcoming some new residents to their island of Monuriki, about 10 km from Nadi—32 young Fijian Crested Iguanas, a critically endangered species found only in Fiji.

With the agreement of the Mataqali, the National Trust of Fiji, with colleagues from the non-government organization BirdLife International, have been restoring the habitat on Monuriki since 2011. They have painstakingly removed all rats and goats. These "invaders" were eating the eggs and hatchlings of the Fiji crested iguana and destroying their natural food source. They threatened the species' very survival. The 32 new arrivals—all bred in captivity at Kula Eco Park and ranging in age from 1 to 3 years - will be released as the next step in international efforts to secure a future of this special lizard.

"Fiji is home to several species of unique iguanas, which are found nowhere else in the world," says Dr. Peter Harlow, the Taronga Zoo ecologist advising the iguana conservation initiative. "They look like neon-colored dragons with their bright green bodies and dorsal crests, but they're actually perfectly camouflaged to hide in Fiji's forests. They're so well hidden that we're still figuring out which islands have iguanas, and how many species of them there are. So to protect and restore even one tiny island like Monuriki will be a big help and is a credit to the foresight of the traditional landowners – the Mataqali Vunaivi of Yanuya Village."

"We have been blessed with this restoration project for Monuriki Island as the island is a major source of income not only for my Mataqali, but for the whole village," states Mr. Maika, spokesman for Mataqali Vunaivi. "This project has also made us realize how important it is to protect the island, for our children's livelihood in the future and also for this very special iguana, the sea birds and other plants and animals that live in it. We thank Kula for breeding more iguanas for our island."

The Fiji crested iguana - known to scientists as *Brachylophus vitiensis* - are only known from a few Fijian islands including: Yadua Taba, Macuata, and Monuriki, and nowhere else on Earth. The land area of Monuriki is only 40 hectares, and yet, somehow, it is home to crested iguanas—whose ancestral origins are still a mystery to scientists.

"Their closest iguana relatives apart from the other Fijian iguanas are more than 8,000 kilometers away in the Galapagos and southwestern North America, and their genetics suggests an even more confusing ancestry," says Dr. Robert Fisher, U.S. Geological Survey, who is based in California but has studied Fijian natural history for 25 years. "It's another reason why Fiji's native wildlife and habitats are important to science, and important for the local community to protect for future study and appreciation."

Hatched and raised at Kula Eco Park at Korotogo to an age and length sufficient to increase their odds of surviving predators, this is the first time that Fiji crested iguanas and the first Fiji endangered species ever to have been bred in captivity and then introduced into the wild. Now, Australian, U.S., and Fijian scientists will track the survival of these 32 young lizards, which each have a unique microchip inserted to identify them when they are recaptured, so that their growth and health can be recorded and compared.

"It's a proud moment for us all," said Ramesh Chand, Director and Manager of the breeding program at Kula Eco Park, "By allowing us to remove a few of the remaining iguanas and breed new stock from them, the traditional landowners have potentially saved a piece of Fiji's natural heritage from extinction, and we are delighted with the results achieved."

But the removal of the "invaders" is already having benefits beyond iguanas. Recovery of the unique dry forest can be seen in the emergence of many young native trees and shrubs which provide essential food and shelter for the Iguana and other wildlife. Birds such as the Banded rail previously unrecorded for the island are now being observed and nesting seabirds like the wedge-tailed shearwater are breeding successfully and the colony is expected to increase over time.

While all rats and goats have been successfully eliminated from Monuriki (and nearby Kadomo) a sizeable challenge remains in ensuring these predators and all other non-native species including mongoose, cats, dogs and pigs among many others are never introduced to the island. NatureFiji-

MareqetiViti and the National Trust are together with the landowners and communities of the area and tourism operators putting in place controls that will prevent these reintroductions. "However, for this to be successful it will require the support of everyone visiting the island to check their equipment and boats in ensuring there are no rats and other introduced species that could be accidentally introduced. If we all do this, together we will leave a very special and unique legacy for Fiji's future generations" says Sia Rasalato of BirdLife International.

"It has taken years of preparation and work to get rid of these two invasive species; however a careless visitor to Monuriki island could bring them back in a day, so we asking if visitors could assist us in implementing biosecurity checks before they visit Monuriki and to be very careful" concluded Mr. Maika. He has urged tour operators and stakeholders, fishermen and others who may visit the island to check their boats and equipment for possible stowaways.

Part of the Funding for the captive breeding program at Kula Eco Park came from the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund. Since mid-2012 the program has been fully funded by Kula Eco Park, while the iguana reintroduction program has received support from San Diego Zoo in California. The removal of introduced predators was led by BirdLife International in partnership with the National Trust, Monuriki landowners and Yanuya community, the David & Lucile Packard Foundation and the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund. Many other individuals and national and international organizations have and continue to contribute to this restoration effort including NatureFiji-MareqetiViti, Fiji government agencies, the Pacific Invasives Initiative, Taronga Zoo, San Diego Zoo, Los Angeles Zoo, Durrell Conservation Academy and International Iguana Foundation in what is an exemplary partnership with the customary owners of Monuriki Island.

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