

# Blue Iguana Recovery Programme reaches milestone with 1,000th release



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The Blue Iguana Recovery Programme is celebrating a milestone almost three decades in the making: the release of its 1,000th blue iguana into the wild.

It's a remarkable achievement, considering just 17 years ago, the blue iguana population was down to around 25 individuals.

Cayman's iconic blue iguana was teetering on the brink of extinction when Frederic Burton, then of the National Trust, made a bold proposal to a small room full of iguana experts back in 2001.

"We had this big meeting trying to figure out what we're gonna do to stop this thing from going extinct, and we all came to the conclusion, well, these are the steps, this is the thing, and we need to try and restore 1,000 iguanas in the wild," said Mr. Burton, former BIRP director.

Almost 18 years later, a goal that may have once seemed insurmountable has been achieved. Mr. Burton released the 1,000th blue iguana into protected land last week.

"If we hadn't jumped in at that point they would've gone extinct there's no two ways about it," said Mr. Burton.

"When we started the breeding program, they estimate that it was about 25 in the wild in total, so at that point they were functionally extinct and we needed human hands in order to bring the population back up," said Blue Iguana Recovery Programme Operations Manager Nick Ebanks.

He told Cayman 27 that the hands-on work must continue to secure the species' future.

"We still have increased development out in East End. We have dogs, we have cats, we had a recent bacteria which we think we might be over with but at the end of the day we don't really know, so there always has to be someone there, vigilant, making sure that these guys are OK," said Mr. Ebanks.

While Mr. Burton told Cayman 27 literally hundreds of individual entities and organisations, including the National Trust and the International Reptile Conservation Foundation all played a part in the blue iguana's remarkable conservation success story, he says it's an effort best not replicated for other endangered species.

“I think the key take-home message is that it is really really hard and it takes a lot of effort and a lot of money to bring a species back from the very brink of extinction, it is much smarter and much more efficient to take steps before gets to that stage,” he stressed.

He told Cayman 27 with a milestone reached, these iconic blue iguanas will endure to cast their charm on another generation of Cayman people.

“They are interesting. They live these complicated social lives, so we can identify with them,” said Mr. Burton.

The Blue Iguana Recovery Programme said the breeding programme will continue, but with a focus on maximising the genetic diversity within the wild blue iguana population.