



Iguana Specialist Group

2002 Annual Meeting, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic
November 14-18

2002 Iguana Specialist Group Conference

John Bendon and John Binns

International Iguana Society and
Iguana Specialist Group

The IUCN/SSC Iguana Specialist Group (ISG) held its annual meeting in November 2002 in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic (DR). The DR occupies about two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola whereas the Republic of Haïti occupies the remainder. Hispaniola is the only island on which two species of Rock Iguanas (*Cyclura*) are sympatric: *C. cornuta*, the Rhinoceros Iguana, and *C. ricordii*, Ricord's Iguana.

The conference was hosted jointly by the Parque Zoológico Nacional (ZooDom) in Santo Domingo, Grupo Jaragua, a non-governmental organization (NGO) devoted to the conservation of Dominican natural resources, and the Coral Resorts. Although the agenda was typically broad, the focus of the meeting and a subsequent workshop was the status of *Cyclura ricordii* (p. 4).

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) has established the Species Survival Commission (SSC), within which about 70 Specialist Groups (including the ISG) address threats to the continuing existence of particular plants and animals. Information from each group is used to classify threatened species by categories ranging from "vulnerable" to "critically endangered." In all, about 7000 people work directly to enhance the chances for the survival of plants and animals. Zoologists, many of whom are zoo curators or university lecturers, government officials, representative of NGOs, or individuals from the private sector all give freely of their time.

Following the opening welcome message, the meeting agenda continued with presentations by each of the endangered or threatened species project representatives. Each of their reports highlighted project successes and disappointments, and all contained a common thread of deep concern for the species' recovery. This year's bittersweet presentations included a report on the successful implementation of the Blue Iguana Species



Cyclura ricordii at ZooDom. Photograph by John Bendon.



Allison Alberts, José Ottenwalder, Quentin Bloxam, Sixto Incháustegui, and Fred Burton (from left to right) at the ISG meeting. Photograph by John Bendon.

Current Status of *Cyclura ricordii*

Adapted from a Report
by Sixto Incháustegui, Grupo Jaragua

Cyclura ricordii, classified as critically endangered on the IUCN Red List, is known only from the Dominican Republic. Populations occur on Isla Cabritos in Lago Enriquillo, two sites near Lago Enriquillo, two locations at Loma del Guano near the southern tip of the Barahona Peninsula in Jaragua National Park in Pedernales Province, and another near Cabo Rojo on the western side of the Peninsula. The total area of all sites combined is less than 100 km².

All populations appear to be declining. For example, a 1985 survey on Isla Cabritos resulted in an estimated iguana density of 8/ha, but the population had dropped to an estimated 1.33/ha by 2000. Recent total population estimates range from 2–4000 individuals at the six locations.

However, in light of the 2000 survey work, those estimates may have to be reduced to fewer than 1500 animals.

Past efforts at captive breeding have met with little success. However, in 2002, ZooDom (Parque Zoológico Nacional in Santo Domingo) successfully produced a clutch of *C. ricordii* from their very small captive population.



(Above) A pair of *Cyclura ricordii* hatchlings at ZooDom. The dark areas on the sides of each animal are individual identification numbers. Photograph by John Binns.



(Left) Adult *Cyclura ricordii* at ZooDom. Photograph by John Binns.



2002 ISG Annual Meeting in the Dominican Republic. Participants included: Quentin Bloxam, Fred Burton, José Ottenwalder, Rick Hudson, Alberto Alvarez, Peter Tolson, Edwin Vargas, Jan Ramer, Dale McGinnity, Allison Alberts, Glenn Gerber, Rachel Goodman, Tandora Grant, Jeff Lemm, Chuck Knapp, Tom Wiewandt, Andy Verhey. Photograph by John Binns.

Recovery Plan headed by Fred Burton. An element of that plan, the population assessment on Grand Cayman, revealed that the Blue Iguana has reached a point of functional extinction, with only 10–25 animals remaining in the wild. Rachel Goodman highlighted her work on Grand Cayman tracking free-ranging Blue Iguanas within the Botanic Park (see article on p. 15).

Ron Carter, from Loma Linda University, brought alarming news of *Cyclura rileyi rileyi*, the San Salvador Rock Iguana. The devastation of remaining populations has been dramatically accelerated by hurricanes, rats, and poaching, the results of which have left this species in a critical situation and complicated recovery measures. In a twist of fate, the poached iguanas were relocated to the local Club Med, where they are reportedly breeding and appear to be larger and healthier than those in their natural habitat.

Chuck Knapp, of the Shedd Aquarium, discussed the plight of the Andros Island Iguana (*Cyclura cyclura cyclura*). The increased presence of hunters using guns and dogs has almost wiped out the entire population of iguanas in his research area. On the bright side, he described the successful translocation of Exuma Island Iguanas (*Cyclura cyclura figginsii*) to establish a second population, increasing the chances of survival of the species in case of natural disasters.

The Anegada or Stout Iguana (*Cyclura pinguis*) received considerable attention. Issues included recovery, limited head-start releases, and relocation. Glenn Gerber detailed the current situation on Anegada and the need to augment the

declining and aged population of wild *Cyclura pinguis* with a limited release of head-started captives. In addition, a new population assessment was proposed for mid-2003 to properly configure elements of the *Cyclura pinguis* Species Recovery Plan currently being drafted. Both of these measures were approved by the ISG Steering Committee.

John Binns reported on the population assessment of *Cyclura pinguis* conducted with James Lazell and Numi Mitchell on Guana and Necker islands, BVI. Some 120–140 animals constitute the second population on Guana, and another 30 animals the third population on Necker.

Additional reports included Karen Graham's account of the Saint Lucian Iguana (*Iguana iguana*), which may represent a distinct species. Alberto Alvarez reported successes in managing the Mona Island Iguana (*C. cornuta stejnegeri*). Miguel Garcia discussed overpopulation of the Cuban Iguana (*C. nubila nubila*) on Isla Magueyes. Rick Hudson reported on the Jamaican Iguana (*C. collei*), Glenn Gerber described the successful relocation of Turks and Caicos Iguanas (*C. carinata carinata*) to various cays within the archipelago, and Joe Wasilewski and John Bendon provided an update of IIS efforts on behalf of Bartschi's Iguana (*C. carinata bartschi*).

Next year's meeting will be held in the Turks and Caicos Islands, site of an ongoing translocation effort to enhance the survival of the Turks and Caicos Iguana (*Cyclura carinata carinata*).

A Field Trip to Isla Cabritos National Park

Some members of the ISG participated in a ZooDom-sponsored field trip to Parque Nacional Isla Cabritos. This island lies in Lago Enriqueillo, a below-sea level, hypersaline lake that was once part of the marine channel separating the Hispaniolan North and South paleoislands. Populations of both endemic species of *Cyclura* occur on the island.

The valley in which the lake is situated, protected to both the north and south by high mountain ranges, acts as a heat sink. As a result, the temperatures frequently exceed 40°C. The island is characterized by white sandy soil, low topography with



The boat ride to Isla Cabritos. Photograph by Joe Wasilewski.



The ISG group was greeted on arrival by Rhinoceros Iguanas habituated to humans. Photograph by Joe Wasilewski.



Large adult male *Cyclura ricordii* in natural habitat on Isla Cabritos. Note the dry-climate-adapted vegetation. Photograph by John Binns.

a central incline, and patchy dry forest composed of succulents, such as aged *Neobottia* tree cactus and shrub-like *Cylindropuntia caribea*, a few palms and epiphytes, and scattered deciduous trees capable of withstanding the harsh, dry conditions.

The trip was strenuous, involving four hours each way in a bus and an hour each way in a boat, which sadly limited time on the island to a short period in the middle of the day, not an ideal time for viewing iguanas, most of which were escaping the heat by retreating into their burrows. *Cyclura cornuta* was common, but *C. ricordii* was scarce.

On the main island opposite Isla Cabritos, a number of *Cyclura cornuta* have become habituated to humans. They were commonly encountered on the paths through the scrub woodland that characterized the shoreline and the area around the visitors' center. Iguanas of all sizes provided ample evidence that they were breeding successfully every year.



Cyclura ricordii on Isla Cabritos, the top individual was seeking shelter from the mid-day heat near the opening of its burrow. Photographs by John Bendon and Joe Wasilewski.



A Rhinoceros Iguana (*Cyclura cornuta*) crossing the road near the visitor's center at Lago Enriquillo. Photograph by Joe Wasilewski.



Rhinoceros Iguanas on exhibit at ZooDom appear to behave naturally. Photograph by Joe Wasilewski.



After the island visit, the ZooDom veterinary staff treated the ISG group to a typical Dominican meal at the "Iguana Hotel." Photograph by John Bendon.

A Trip to ZooDom

A trip on the final day of the meeting to ZooDom included a delicious buffet lunch and a short speech by the director, Dr. Alfonso Ferreira, who thanked the ISG for coming and contributing valuable advice and assistance.

ZooDom is well known in the reptile world as the principal breeding center for Rhinoceros Iguanas. Offspring are not sold to the public — *Cyclura cornuta*, like all Rock Iguanas, is protected under provisions of the Convention for International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). However, many approved institutions throughout the world have been the recipients of animals bred at the zoo. The public display in which iguanas live is a large, oval habitat surrounded, like most other exhibits at the zoo, by a



ZooDom director Dr. Alfonso Ferreira holding two recently hatched *Cyclura ricordii*. Photograph by John Bendon.

deep trench. The terrain within the enclosure was dotted with rocks and cacti and other naturally occurring vegetation. The iguanas had plenty of space and appeared to behave as they would in the




Cyclura cornuta on exhibit at ZooDom. Photograph by John Bendon.

Cyclura ricordii hatchling at ZooDom. Photograph by John Binns



wild. The off-exhibit holding pens similarly housed many iguanas, some of which were destined for export.

Newly-hatched *Cyclura ricordii*, quarantined in the ZooDom veterinary facility, are quite rare in captivity. These young Ricord's Iguanas are continually monitored and afforded every opportunity to increase their chance of survival. The attending zoo veterinarian mentioned that the currently offered food was not being consumed as readily as they had expected. ISG members viewing these young animals suggested including in the diet crickets dusted with vitamins and calcium and Hibiscus flowers that were abundant on the zoo grounds. The latter are a favorite with most iguanas. Between the rows of clinic buildings, fencing has been installed to provide enclosure space for literally hundreds of young Rhinoceros Iguanas. In an ingenious use of space, the close proximity to the surrounding facilities affords continual monitoring of these young iguanas. 

Acknowledgements

The following persons (listed in alphabetical order) were instrumental in assuring the success of the 2002 ISG Meeting. Their hospitality was endless and their contributions to the meeting inestimable. We thank them all.

Yvonne Arias, Grupo Jaragua
 Josefa Castro, ZooDom
 Angelica Espinal, ZooDom
 Cladio Vladimir Eusebio, Acuario Nacional
 Alfonso Ferreira, ZooDom
 Sixto J. Incháustegui, Grupo Jaragua
 José A. Ottenwalder, AeroDom
 Roberto Maria, Zoodom
 Enrique Pugibet, Acuario Nacional
 Deyanira Rubio, ZooDom
 Ernst Rupp, Grupo Jaragua
 Gloria Santana, Depto. Vida Silvestre
 Andreas Schubert, Programa Mediambiental
 Transforesterio Haiti-RD
 Elizabeth Maria Skeet Garcia, ZooDom

Summary of the Proposed *Cyclura ricordii* Species Recovery Plan

The 2002 Annual Meeting of the IUCN/SSC Iguana Specialist Group and the Recovery Planning Workshop for Ricord's Iguana (*Cyclura ricordii*) was hosted by Dr. Alphonso Ferreira, Director, Parque Zoológico Nacional (ZooDom) and the Coral Resorts in the Dominican Republic. The intense two-day recovery planning workshop was facilitated by Frederic J. Burton using his template for the Blue Iguana Species Recovery Plan.

Summarized, the Ricord's Iguana Species Recovery Plan includes the following components: (1) Rapid surveys will be conducted in order to map all areas in which Ricord's Iguanas still occur along with a more detailed survey of the protected population on Isla Cabritos in Lago Enriquillo. The results of these surveys will provide information necessary to propose protection of all areas critical to the survival of this species, including an extension of Parque Nacional Jaragua in the Cabo Rojo area, already under consideration. (2) Major public awareness and education efforts in areas where Ricord's Iguanas still occur will be implemented primarily by Grupo Jaragua in order to develop local community support. In Santo Domingo, the role of ZooDom in enhancing public awareness will be expanded. (3) Once initial studies are com-

plete, a planning workshop will review results to define terms of reference for a future management plan in protected areas supporting Ricord's Iguana populations. (4) Threats posed by predation and habitat degradation will be prioritized and then progressively managed to reduce or eliminate the causative agents in protected areas. Restoration of endemic vegetation in degraded areas also will be attempted. (5) In order to effectively address the many issues likely to influence conservation management, additional research on distribution, abundance, and ecology will be conducted. (6) A feasibility study of captive husbandry and propagation will be implemented using the two adult pairs currently at ZooDom. If the animals successfully reproduce, offspring may be used in other locations in Santo Domingo and Parque Nacional Jaragua area to educate and enhance public awareness. (7) Funding for the Ricord's Iguana Species Recovery Plan will be obtained from local and international grants. In addition, the sale of retail products in the Dominican Republic and internationally may supplement funds acquired from other sources.

When approved, the Ricord's Iguana Species Recovery Plan will be administered by the newly formed Ricord's Iguana Recovery Group in the Dominican Republic, with support from the IUCN-SSC Iguana Specialist Group and the International Iguana Foundation (IIF).



(Above) *Cyclura ricordii* at ZooDom.
Photograph by John Bendon.



(Left) Grazing donkeys pose ongoing problems for the recovery of natural vegetation on Isla Cabritos. The mountains in the background shelter the valley and the island from prevailing winds and contribute to the very hot, dry climate. Photograph by John Binns.