

FOCUS ON CONSERVATION

GRAND CAYMAN BLUE IGUANA (*Cychura lewisi*)



BLUE IGUANA RECOVERY PROGRAM

GRAND CAYMAN, CAYMAN ISLANDS

Conservation action for the Grand Cayman Blue Iguana began in 1990 and accelerated in late 2001, after the Cayman Islands hosted a meeting of the World Conservation Union's Iguana Specialist Group. At that landmark meeting, the world's top experts on iguana conservation worked with local scientists and managers to conceive an action plan to save the Blue Iguana. Shortly thereafter, news came in from field surveys that wild Blue Iguanas were truly on the verge of functional extinction, and the Blue Iguana Recovery Program was founded in its present form.

The original program began with captive breeding, combined with long-term field studies of the remnant wild Blue Iguana population. This yielded essential scientific data to guide early conservation planning. By 1994, enough information was on hand to enable the Cayman Islands National Trust's small team to test a key strategy: release of captive-bred subadults back to the wild. Captive breeding success led to stepwise expansion of the captive facilities, which were relocated in 1995 to the QE II Botanic Park, and by 2004 reached the capacity to rear and release up to 100 subadult Blue Iguanas annually.

Captive-bred Blue Iguanas released into the QE II Botanic Park were breeding in the wild by 2000: but, as this restored population gradually expanded, the original wild population was in catastrophic decline, falling to between 10 and 25 individuals by 2002. Today, the Park is near its limit, with about 30 free-ranging Blue Iguanas, and a second restored population has recently been founded in the National Trust's Salina Reserve. The Program owes much of its current success to expanding volunteerism and financial support from many sectors. Both are as critical now as they have ever been, now that the work moves toward large-scale population restoration, giving the Grand Cayman Blue Iguana a future once more.