

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

I've had the pleasure of some enriching moments during my 25-year career in wildlife conservation, working with a variety of reptiles, as well as Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) and Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*). Over the years, I have captured, marked, and released well over three thousand American Crocodiles (*Crocodylus acutus*). Being able to release these endangered animals is extremely fulfilling, despite knowing that only 5–10% of them will survive the first year. Of the crocodiles that do survive, some will undoubtedly expand their range and, in some cases, encroach on populated areas. The available natural habitat of the crocodile is shrinking daily. Future interactions between humans and crocodiles are inevitable and educating people before such interactions take place is crucial.

Many of the same factors that cause eagles and ospreys and crocodiles to be endangered affect the various species of *Cyclura* throughout their respective ranges. In February 2001, I traveled to Jamaica with Rick Hudson of the Fort Worth Zoo to assist in the release of 13 Jamaican Iguanas (*Cyclura collei*). We accompanied Byron Wilson into the Hellshire Hills, the remaining natural range of the species. This particular event brought the number of head-started and released animals to 39. While the news may be encouraging for the Jamaican Iguana, the obstacles they face have not really changed: shrinking habitat, feral predators, and limited resources. Much work is still necessary to assist the iguanas and increase their population in the Hellshire Hills.

That story, however, brings me to another “happy ending” — the historic release of 24 head-started Stout Iguanas (*Cyclura pinguis*). In October 2003, I accompanied Rick Hudson, Jeff Lemm of the San Diego Zoo, and Kelly Bradley of the Dallas Zoo to the island of Anegada in the British Virgin Islands. The 24 oldest iguanas from the head-start program were selected, health screened, processed, and readied for release. Even with 24 new adult and sub-adult iguanas in the population, the threats, like those in Jamaica, remain the same. This time, however, the people of Anegada are making plans to eliminate the feral cat problem, and actually want to focus on preserving some of the core habitat. Time will tell if these measures will bring about positive results.

The emotions that come into play while releasing endangered animals are difficult to describe. I try to include people from all walks of life to assist in the releases and share in the experience. You actually have a sense of giving back and getting closer to nature. In

some small way, you are helping to preserve a species for posterity. For just a few moments, you watch in amazement and forget all the obstacles these animals will face. The iguanas don't just bolt away; they walk a bit, taste the ground, look up at you, maybe give a head bob or two. They seem at home and take their time walking away.

Even though we are now returning some of these animals to the wild, our work is not finished — instead, it has only just begun. All of the threats that brought these species to their current states still exist, and conservation organizations around the world must work together to preserve these animals for future generations.



Joe Wasilewski, IIS President, participating in the release on Middle Cay. Photograph by Rick Hudson.

The International Iguana Society is working with many organizations to make this a better world. If you know people who should join the society and help in this worthwhile endeavor, sign them up!!!

Joe Wasilewski