

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

The San Salvador Iguana (*Cyclura rileyi rileyi*)

On a recent trip to San Salvador in the Bahamas, IIS Board Members Joe Burgess, John Binns, and I had an opportunity to visit a very rare Rock Iguana, *Cyclura rileyi rileyi*. Once found on a number of cays in and around San Salvador, these animals are presently restricted to several small cays near San Salvador and a couple of cays in some salt ponds in the southern part of the island. With a total population estimated at no more



Iguana awareness sign proudly displayed on Green Cay, San Salvador, Bahamas donated by the IIS. *Photograph by John Binns*

than 500 individuals, *C. r. rileyi* is undergoing a rapid decline and has recently been extirpated from several cays. The population decline is due to the same stressors faced by all too many other species of *Cyclura*, with predation by dogs and cats playing the major role in this instance.

Cyclura rileyi rileyi is a relatively small iguana with a maximum total length of no more than 700 mm. Two other subspecies (*C. r. cristata* and *C. r. nuchalis*) are currently recognized and are similar in size. All are beautiful animals with a dull gray background accentuated with blotches of blue and yellow. Some specimens are a bright orange. No more than 200 *C. r. cristata* remain on White Cay in the southern Exuma Island chain. To gauge just how fragile certain populations are, a few years ago, these iguanas were nearly extirpated by a single raccoon released on the island by passing boaters. Both of these populations also have suffered at the hands of wildlife poachers. *Cyclura rileyi nuchalis* is found primarily in the Acklins Islands and has been successfully translocated to an island near the Allen's Cays. Largely due to their remote range, these populations seem to be holding their own and currently number around 13,000 individuals.

Drs. Bill Hayes and Ron Carter of Loma Linda University in California have studied all three subspecies for many years, and an action plan for the conservation of the San Salvador Iguana has been developed. Most recently, Hayes and Carter have proposed a headstart facility. Headstarting has proven to be a relatively successful strategy for other species, such as *Cyclura pinguis* on Anegada, *Cyclura collei* in the Hellshire Hills of Jamaica, and *Cyclura lewisi* on Grand Cayman.

The Gerace Research Center on San Salvador is an ideal site for a headstart facility. On-site staff could easily be trained in the husbandry of *Cyclura rileyi*. Once raised to a manageable size, iguanas could be translocated to suitable cays. To date, no such conservation project exists anywhere in the Bahamas, despite the presence of three species and seven varieties of *Cyclura* — all of which are endangered to varying degrees. A project like the proposed headstart facility may be all that it takes to trigger the development of a fully integrated wildlife conservation program in the Bahamas.

Joseph Wasilewski