

PROFILE

Rick Hudson: A Hero for Iguana Conservation

Allison Alberts

The Center for Reproduction of Endangered Species
The Zoological Society of San Diego

Rick was born in Roanoke, Virginia, in 1954, and grew up nearby in the small town of Stuart in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains. From the very beginning, he was adamant that he would be a zoo man. His earliest childhood memory was standing in front of the hippo exhibit at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. when he was four and getting stung by a bee. Always a catalyst for action, twelve-year old Rick opened his very own backyard “Woodland Zoo,” featuring local lizards, frogs, turtles, salamanders, and other assorted creatures. The operation attained local fame in his native Patrick County, even leading to a feature article in the local newspaper in 1966. The article quoted Rick as saying that, when he grew up, he aspired to “become a naturalist and work in a real zoo” — and that’s exactly what he did. Showing an uncanny aptitude for creative fundraising that I’m fairly certain will last a lifetime, Rick once admitted to me that he supported his mini zoo by charging a

quarter to curious kids wanting to watch the rabbits ... well, you get the idea.

After graduating from the University of Richmond with a degree in Biology, Rick’s dream of a zoo career was realized in 1980, when he joined the professional staff of the Fort Worth Zoo. There he served as Assistant Curator of Reptiles for 20 years, building a model program that was to become widely admired throughout the international zoo community. Rick’s tenure in the herpetological department was guided by an enduring philosophy that recognized the need to link captive populations to their wild counterparts in order to achieve the greatest conservation impact. As a result, the remarkable collection at Fort Worth was integrally tied to field conservation programs around the world, including chameleons on Mt. Kenya, geckos, boas, and chelonians in Madagascar, arboreal alligator lizards (genus *Abronia*) in southern México, and Komodo Dragons in Indonesia. Nowhere, however, was this philosophy more effectively put into action than in the islands of the Caribbean.

Rick first visited this unique and beautiful region in 1977 with a trip to Jamaica. It was no less than love at first sight. Since then, his appreciation and affection for these islands, their natural communities, their unique cultures (did I mention cuisine?), and most of all their majestic iguanas, has only grown. He has had the good fortune to work with Rock Iguanas (genus *Cyclura*) not only in Jamaica, but also in the Cayman Islands, the British Virgin Islands, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and the Bahamas. By Rick’s account, the DR is his all-time favorite because of the rich cultural experience and warmth of the people.

Initially, Rick’s contributions were realized through his capacity as Chair of the American Zoo and Aquarium Association’s Lizard Advisory Group from 1991–2003, and as Coordinator of the Rock Iguana Species Survival Program from 1996 to the present. In these roles, he has served as a tireless organizer, involving over 25 U.S. zoos in such varied activities as education, field research, captive propagation and reintroduction, technology transfer, and genetic and nutritional research, not to mention generating over \$400,000 to support iguana conservation. That so many zoos have become committed at such a remarkable level attests to Rick’s innate ability to bring people of diverse backgrounds together and inspire them to achieve a shared vision.

I first met Rick in 1992 at an IUCN Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (CBSG) workshop in Vancouver. The



Rick and his “mini-zoo” in 1965. Photograph by R.D. Hudson.



Rick was completely “disarmed” by this young Javan Gibbon at the Taman Safari Wildlife Park in Bogor, Indonesia (taken while on his honeymoon in 1994). *Photograph by Lis Hudson.*

goal of the workshop, led by the late Ulysses S. Seal, then head of CBSG and one of Rick’s most influential mentors, was to develop a Conservation Assessment and Management Plan for iguanid and varanid lizards. Although I had previously conducted ecological research on Desert and Green iguanas, I was a novice to lizard conservation and relatively new to the people and issues involved. Rick welcomed me warmly and assured me that I had a contribution to make. So began a friendship that would steer my life in a new direction. Over the next two days, we tried in vain to fill in Excel® spreadsheets with data about species distributions, population trends, and threats to survival. We were finally forced to admit how woefully little information was available for so many species, especially iguanas. A need to organize researchers and managers to gather the expertise needed to help guide and prioritize conservation efforts was clearly evident — and Rick had the skills and drive to do it.

The next two years were pivotal for Rick. He cites two inspirational experiences that served to define his future career path. Sitting in a headstart facility at the Hope Zoo, surrounded by young Jamaican Iguanas (*Cyclura collei*), watching their interactions, and then later that summer at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, observing a dense congregation of habituated Cuban Iguanas (*C. nubila*), something clicked, and the connection was so visceral that he remembers thinking, “You know, this is worth dedicating your life to. This is where I need to be.”



Rick assisting with health screening of a Grand Cayman Blue Iguana in November 2001. *Photograph by John Binns.*

A logical place to start was the Jamaican Iguana, a species thought to be extinct until the remarkable rediscovery in 1990 of a tiny remnant population clinging to existence in the rugged Hellshire Hills outside Kingston. Again working with Ulie and CBSG, Rick and Peter Vogel of the University of the West Indies organized a Population and Habitat Viability Analysis workshop for the species, then considered to be the most endangered lizard in the world. Although a solid plan was developed and key research needs identified, perhaps the most significant outcome occurred the day after the workshop officially concluded, when the participants stayed on to informally share information on a variety of Rock Iguanas and to brainstorm how we might work together in a more coordinated fashion to help ensure their future survival. It was here that the idea of forming an IUCN Iguana Specialist Group was born, with the consensus that our initial focus would be on the critically endangered iguanas of the West Indies.

To gain official sanction for the group from the somewhat resistant IUCN Species Survival Commission, Rick enlisted the help of Commission Steering Committee members Ulie Seal, George Rabb (Chicago Zoological Society), and Russ Mittermeier (Conservation International) in lobbying for approval. Rick’s tenacity finally paid off three years later, when George announced to the assembled iguana enthusiasts at the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists (ASIH)/Herpetologists’ League (HL) meeting in Seattle that the West Indian Iguana Specialist Group had become a reality. In 2000, the group expanded its mandate to become a global Iguana Specialist Group, which I have had the pleasure to co-chair, most recently with Rick. He has been instrumental in developing a new Species Recovery Planning process that is changing the way we approach iguana conservation by fully engaging local partners and thereby ensuring a lasting impact. If I bring a scientific, analytical perspective to the Iguana Specialist Group, then Rick surely represents its heart and soul. He is a joy to work with, always upbeat and eager to take on even the most



Rick releasing a headstarted Jamaican Iguana in the Hellshire Hills in 1998. *Photographer unknown.*

complex problems and situations. His commitment never wanes, and it is clear from watching him that his work on behalf of iguanas is truly a labor of love.

In 2000, the Fort Worth Zoo wisely realized that the cause of conservation would be better served by allowing Rick to devote his energy and talents full-time to this endeavor. He became their Conservation Biologist, able to devote 100% of his time to endangered species recovery programs. This was also the year that things came full circle for Rick, when a group of twelve zoos, led by Fort Worth, shared the AZA International Conservation Award for their collaborative efforts to help save the Jamaican Iguana. Rick will proudly tell you that recognition of the Jamaican Iguana Conservation and Recovery Program as one of the world's great conservation success stories was a highlight of his professional career — but, if you catch him in a more personal frame of mind, he might also share with you a defining experience he had when participating in a release of headstarted iguanas deep in Jamaica's Hellshire Hills. As he was watching a repatriated iguana slowly move away from the release site, the animal looked back, directly into Rick's eyes, and he felt a connection so profound that he was moved to tears. That was a moment that embodied everything Rick has worked so hard to achieve, and a memory that will remain with him all his life.

Never satisfied with the status quo, Rick's most recent contribution has been to act as the impetus for the formation of the



Rick digging in Jamaica's Hellshire Hills to install a data logger in an iguana nest. *Photograph by Glenn Gerber.*

International Iguana Foundation. The mission of the non-profit foundation, which Rick serves as Program Officer, is to support conservation, awareness, and scientific programs that enhance the survival of wild iguanas and their habitats. The foundation, which has raised over \$236,000 to date in direct support for iguana conservation activities, works hand-in-hand with the Iguana Specialist Group to develop and administer programs, as well as determine funding priorities.

In looking back over his years of contributions to iguana conservation, Rick had this to say: "The successful iguana reintroduction programs that we've launched in Jamaica, Grand Cayman, and Anegada prove that captive-reared or headstarted iguanas are good candidates for such recovery strategies. They appear to be hard-wired, and rapidly adapt to wild conditions. We are seeing good survival rates, and released iguanas are now integrating with wild populations and reproducing naturally. Programs such as these once received harsh criticism from some in the academic community, but I take great pride in proving the critics wrong. Reintroduction technology is such a wide-open field and there are so many possibilities, we are just starting to write the book. I'm just happy to be involved with it at such an intimate level. When I consider my primary influences and my most productive collaborations in iguana conservation, three people come to mind: Allison of course, who has been with me from day one, and has always shared my 'let's get it done' attitude. With her, I am confident that anything is possible. For strategic thinking and planning, especially fund-raising, my Director, Mike Fouraker, has been instrumental. Plus he recognized my abilities and gave me the time and support to use them. And, most recently, John Binns; his tireless work ethic and perfectionist attitude is contagious, just being involved with him drives you to give it your best. I know as long as John is around that I will never be able to sit back and rest on my laurels."

Amazingly, Rick still finds time to make major contributions to herpetological conservation efforts beyond iguanas. In 2001, he co-founded the IUCN Turtle Survival Alliance (TSA), a non-profit organization with the goal of developing and maintaining a global network of living tortoises and freshwater turtles that maximizes future options for the recovery of wild populations. The TSA is particularly committed to helping alleviate the Asian turtle crisis, brought on by the enormous and unsustainable harvest of turtles throughout Southeast Asia for the



Rick overlooking the western ponds complex on Anegada, taking a break after a long day of fieldwork. *Photograph by Jeff Lemm.*

Chinese food market. To date, over 4,727 turtles belonging to 38 species have been rescued by the alliance and placed in managed captive programs worldwide. Under Rick's guidance the TSA has emerged as a widely recognized force for turtle conservation, expanding their global network to support range country programs in India, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Myanmar. Rick shares that he is "particularly passionate about insuring TSA's success, because we are proving the naysayers wrong. Most doubted that such a diverse coalition of partner organizations and individuals could unite for a common cause — saving turtles. But then I've made a career out of proving the critics wrong and I've never minded sticking my neck out for a good cause. But more importantly, I know this is a battle we can win." In addition, Rick serves as an active member of the IUCN Conservation Breeding, Crocodile, Reintroduction, and Madagascar Reptile and Amphibian Specialist Groups. He has traveled widely to destinations that include two "tours of duty" in Madagascar (that he still considers the trips of a lifetime), Africa, Costa Rica, Guatemala, México, Malaysia, India, and Indonesia, where his up-close and personal experiences with Komodo Dragons while on honeymoon absolutely fulfilled a lifetime dream.

Rick has never been one to shy away from controversial issues or seemingly lost causes. In fact, he has made a living by tackling tough issues and successfully rallying others to do the same. He entices all the stakeholders to the table, and has a rare gift for keeping them there in the pursuit of mutual solutions to challenging conservation problems. His dedication and passion continue to enable him to recruit new partners to the cause of

iguana conservation and motivate them to make a difference. Rick will tell you that he lives by a simple creed: Every species has a right to survive, and humankind does not have the right to cause the extinction of another species. As long as Rick has anything to say about it, iguanas are in good hands indeed.

If you would like to help, please visit the websites of the International Iguana Foundation (www.iguanafoundation.org) and the Turtle Survival Alliance (www.turtlesurvival.org).



Rick during his first trip to Madagascar in 1991, shown here at the Amphijora Field Station, site of the breeding program for the endangered Angulated Tortoise, *Geochelone yniphora*. *Photograph by John Behler.*