

FOCUS ON CONSERVATION

Fijian Crested Iguana (*Brachylophus vitiensis*)



PETER HARLOW

The only true iguanas found outside the Americas are the two species of Pacific iguanas, which are restricted to the islands of Fiji and Tonga in the southwestern Pacific. Both are arboreal herbivores that feed on the leaves, flowers, and fruits of native trees and shrubs. The critically endangered Fijian Crested Iguana (*Brachylophus vitiensis*) is today secure on only one small, uninhabited island, the 70-hectare Crested Iguana Sanctuary island of Yadua Tabu, administered by the National Trust of the Fiji Islands. Populations on most other islands appear to be functionally extinct, with little or no juvenile recruitment. The threatening processes that have contributed to the species' decline continue unchecked (native forest degradation from clearing, burning, proliferation of invasive plants, and over-grazing by goats, as well as the introduction of cats and mongooses).

The World Conservation Union's Iguana Specialist Group met in Fiji in November 2004 to address this species' conservation requirements and produce a conservation and management plan. Priorities include identifying islands suitable for the species' long-term survival, collecting urgently required natural history data to aid conservation planning (especially on diet and reproduction, of which nothing is known), and initiating captive breeding with animals from populations other than Yadua Tabu.

The uninhabited island of Monuriki was identified as the first choice for sourcing Crested Iguanas for a second captive breeding group. Monuriki is a spectacular island, its Crested Iguanas are genetically distinct from Yadua Tabu, and its location close to a major tourist area provides an excellent potential for future ecotourism. The native forest, however, has been severely degraded by fires, intensive goat grazing, and invasive plants. Iguana surveys suggest that the population on Monuriki has decreased from an estimated 80–120 iguanas in 1998 to 10–20 in 2003, with no evidence of juvenile recruitment during that time.

Kula Eco Park, Fiji's only center for captive breeding of endangered species, has volunteered to set up the Monuriki captive breeding group, while zoos in Australia will continue captive breeding of iguanas from Yadua Tabu. The rationale is that Monuriki Crested Iguanas will soon be (or perhaps already are) functionally extinct; but, if enough founders remain and can be brought into captivity, their progeny could be returned to Monuriki when habitat restoration (or goat exclusion fencing) is completed.

For more information on the Fijian Crested Iguana see *IGUANA* 11(4), December 2004, "Lost in the South Pacific: The Fijian Iguanas (Genus *Brachylophus*)" by Peter Harlow. You also may visit the websites of Kula Eco Park (www.fiji-wild.com) and the International Conservation Fund for the Fijian Crested Iguana (www.icffci.com).