

SPECIAL AWARD

Fred Burton Honored¹

Natural scientist Frederic James Burton's decision not to pursue a career in academia has proved to be a singular and far-reaching blessing for the Cayman Islands. Mr. Burton is this year's Queen's Birthday Honors recipient of the Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) award for "services to the conservation of endangered species in the Cayman Islands."

Mr. Burton's unflagging efforts, characterized by his dedication, devotion, diligence, innate modesty, and unassuming approach, provide the backdrop for his contribution to conservation in general and endangered species in particular. He also has found time to write two books, bringing attention to native vegetation, some of which is in imminent danger of vanishing without protection. He also has coauthored a number of research papers in natural history journals. However, he is best known locally and internationally for his stellar work in ongoing attempts to save from extinction Grand Cayman's largest land animal, the Blue Iguana (*Cyclura lewisi*).

He has been exceedingly effective and committed to conservation advocacy and education, fund-raising, and elevating public awareness. He has secured international funds and vol-

unteers for ongoing initiatives to preserve the Islands' natural resources for present and future generations. He helped start several of these initiatives aimed at protecting and cataloging the flora and fauna on all three of the nation's islands, as well as mapping vulnerable tracts of land and identifying native vegetation.

"I felt very strongly that I wanted to make a difference in the world in some shape or form rather than sit in an academic ivory tower," Mr. Burton recalled about his decision not to go for a doctoral degree. After he obtained a master's degree in natural sciences from Cambridge University, Mr. Burton, who was born in the picturesque Lake District in England in 1957, rejected Ph.D. prospects and took instead a position as Research Assistant in Cayman's Mosquito Research and Control Unit in 1979. Spending much of his early life in Kuwait, where his father was employed, translated into his acquiring a strong interest in reptiles and other fauna of the Arabian Desert.

¹ Fred Burton and the Blue Iguana Recovery Programme were featured in *Iguana* 10(2):53-55 (2003).



Frederic James Burton, shown here releasing a captive-bred Grand Cayman Blue Iguana (*Cyclura lewisi*) in order to augment wild populations, is this year's Queen's Birthday Honors recipient of the Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) award for "services to the conservation of endangered species in the Cayman Islands."

In 12 years' service with MRCU, he became Deputy Director and sometimes single-handedly managed three roles as research officer, deputy head, and Acting Director. "It was a very difficult and stressful time," he remembers. However, through his work he learned first-hand of the rapid destruction of his mangrove forest study sites, which succumbed to tourism and residential development, especially along the West Bay corridor.

When the National Trust was established in 1988, he began volunteering until he was seconded by government full-time to the Trust in 1991. His important work in environmental conservation covering a number of areas began as a volunteer in 1990, and includes: (1) Surveying the land given to the 624-acre Salina Reserve in the eastern districts of Grand Cayman and mapping its biodiversity; (2) Coordinating work to start the QEII Botanic Park and being mainly responsible for the development of the park until its official opening in 1996; and (3) Spearheading conservation efforts to help save the critically endangered Grand Cayman Blue Iguana from the brink of extinction. As a Trust staff member, his main achievements include: (1) Starting the acquisition of the Mastic Reserve; (2) A 10-year effort to fully protect the Booby Pond Nature Reserve in Little Cayman; and (3) Acquisition of a block of land to start the Cayman Brac Parrot Reserve to help conservation of this endangered species, which is one of two parrot subspecies endemic to the Cayman Islands. "I am very proud to have been a part of that," Mr. Burton says. He also led a public awareness campaign on the Central Mangrove Wetlands. "A huge amount of work needs to be done there; we also need a policy on that."

Of the award, he takes it in stride with his characteristic modesty, but hopes the recognition that it brings to environmental protection will lead to a better future for Cayman. "I hope it helps bring some attention to the fact that environmental issues are becoming important," he comments.

"There are many others who like me are working way beyond the point of duty and equally deserving of this kind of recognition, especially my colleagues at the National Trust and the Department of Environment. I hope that happens. For instance, DOE has been working for years to modernize our environmental legislation. If one thing happens this year, I do hope it is the passage of the National Conservation Law," he adds. Currently, only about 6.5% of the entire Cayman Islands land is preserved. "It is generally accepted that at least 10% of unique habitats, and 20% or more of ecologically critical habitats, should be protected in all countries. We have a ways to go," he notes.

Cayman is indeed distinct from many other Caribbean islands in that much of its natural habitat is intact, albeit largely in private ownership. This is especially the case with the dry forests on all three islands, which manifest distinct characteristics. "Dry forests are endangered worldwide, and the Caribbean dry forests are in a dire state," he observes. "It is in our national interest to save those forests."

On all three islands, and particularly on Grand Cayman, ongoing and potential development threatens the status quo, he says. It is against this backdrop that he hopes that the current

Development Plan review will be successful in designating specific areas as protected after the previous two attempts failed, thereby futilely involving hours upon hours of involvement from the community seeking better conservation.

Cayman's plus factors include our "charismatic flagship species," our parrots and Blue Iguanas, which catch the eye of tourists. "There is no question that Cayman's natural environment and unique Caymanian species are huge capital assets that underwrite our tourism marketing, both official DOT's and the private sector's," he comments. Environmental sustainability will not be achieved "unless we are prepared to set aside areas to underpin our tourism product and maintain our national identity — or the reasons why the Cayman Islands are recognized as the Cayman Islands," he posits.

One such success story is the Blue Iguana Recovery Programme. Credit for the success lies directly at Mr. Burton's door, sometimes literally, such as when he had to play surrogate parent to young hatchlings housed in adequate, airy cages in his own backyard. Over a half-dozen organizations in the US and UK have been directly involved in various aspects of the ongoing iguana conservation program, primarily through his efforts. The Programme has seen a remarkable level of volunteerism, and local corporate financing has contributed as much as 50% of the funding. A number of hitherto innovative steps for Cayman such as radio-tagging and micro-chip implanting became possible through Mr. Burton's engagement of the international community.

He started the Blue Iguana captive breeding program in 1990 from a pair obtained from Florida to help boost the numbers of animals in the wild by releasing captive-reared iguanas into designated areas. With international volunteers, he undertook a census of the wild population that revealed a grim picture of a species teetering on the verge of extinction with a mere 10–25 animals clinging to life in 2002. Since then, through controlled releases of two-year-old hatchlings at the Botanic Park and the Salina Reserve, the Blue population has spurred to 250 following a recent release of two-year-old hatchlings. The day the captive breeding program ceases will be a day of rejoicing for all — and especially Mr. Burton.

His first book, in collaboration with Ms. Penny Clifford, titled *Wild Trees in the Cayman Islands*, first published in 1997, will be out in an expanded second edition with photographs in July. His second book, titled *Threatened Plants of the Cayman Islands*, is a red-list assessment, will also contain a number of photographs, and is close to publication. The style displayed in both the books is typical of his practicality and pragmatism. "There is no use creating information if people cannot access it," he comments.

Mr. Burton has a lot of work ahead in analyzing the huge body of information gathered over the last three years from radio-tracking Blue Iguanas released in the Salina Reserve. Those data will guide the next steps in the conservation program. This is something to which he is looking forward with his customary incisiveness in the coming months.

Pat Eubanks