

International Iguana Society
3rd Annual Conference/Research Expedition

CONFERENCE REVIEW AND REPORT

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JOHN BENDON

17A HALLSWELLE PARADE, FINCHLEY ROAD, LONDON, NW110DL, ENGLAND

I was privileged to be among twenty four people from diverse parts of the United States who attended the third annual conference of the I.I.S. which, this year, was held at the Bahamian Field Station on the Island of San Salvador, the easternmost island of the Bahamas group. In addition, one member came from Puerto Rico, one from England, and three from the Bahamas.

The main objective of the convention this year was not just to talk about iguanas and their care and conservation, but to actively take part in field trips on the various cays surrounding the island in order to increase the known data on

Cyclura rileyi rileyi. This beautiful lizard, males weighing about 2 kilos (4.4 lbs) fully grown, is on the decline and even extinct on a number of cays, for a number of reasons. Rats, notorious swimmers, have been seen on some cays. Tourists, also notorious swimmers, have also been spotted. The rats, *Rattus rattus* possibly eat the lizard eggs by digging them up. The tourists, "*Rattus homo sapiens*" (!), swim or boat over and unknowingly step on the shallow nests, which are just little burrows in the ground. On one cay they also feed the "cute little things," causing them to veer away from their natural behaviour and to eat a different,



San Salvador iguana, *Cyclura rileyi* in habitat. Photograph: Rena Burch



Bahamian Field Station Director, Dan Suchy (left), with Bahamas Ministry of Agriculture representative, Dr. Eric Carey, at the San Salvador IIS Conference. *Photograph: John Bendon*

sometimes damaging, diet; and to perhaps become too tame, enabling them to be illegally smuggled off of the cays. Carelessly left plastic food-wrap was found by one of our party. If any animal eats this it can choke to death.

On a number of cays, an insect infestation of the prickly pear cactus, a substantial iguana food, has been found. This was most evident on Green and High Cays. The Society has reliably been informed that most of San Salvador and several satellite cays are privately owned, which means that the government does not have the upper hand in decisions involving the use of the land. Of course if more and more people come to this paradise, the paradise turns to purgatory.

One very important part of this trip, as well as tagging the animals with colored beads for future identification, was to take blood samples from the iguanas to extract the DNA and establish how closely related the different groups are and their position on the family tree of *Cyclura* and indeed the whole group of Iguanids. This was done with

special permission from the Bahamian government (represented on this trip by Dr. Eric Carey, conservation officer from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries) and CITES permits had to be obtained to bring the blood samples into Florida. The Bahamas National Trust was represented by Sandra Buckner from Nassau. Both these people saw first hand the present state of the flora and fauna and are important links between the I.I.S. and the Bahamian authorities. Much money and research is needed; much publicity is needed.

The first day on the field station was spent getting acclimatized, with I.I.S. members getting to know each other and familiar faces meeting again. An early breakfast in the communal dining room the next day was greatly appreciated, setting up members for the first field trip. Our schedule called for a trip on the back of an open truck to the other end of the island where we were to board a boat to go to High and Low Cays. Two small boats were available, one with a motor and one dinghy which was towed behind. The sea was a



San Salvador iguana, *Cyclura rileyi*, on Green Cay. Photograph: Rena Burch

light turquoise color, slightly choppy. The season was getting into winter, although the temperature was about 75°F (23°C). The cloud formations were very varied, beautiful to look at, constantly changing. Everybody was very excited on this first day; many tens of iguanas were awaiting us on these cays we hoped; it was a far cry from the grim leaden skies and smoke-drenched cities some of us had escaped from.

The day passed quickly, a memorable one for all. We found no iguanas on High Cay, just the insect infestation mentioned above. On Low Cay, however, there were lizards on the far side. We got caught in a strong, squally shower that blew over in a few minutes, leaving us quite cold and shivering. The thing to do was to jump into the water, which was warm. Nobody minded the wet and people became wet and dry at least four times during the day. Some swam to the cays but most took the boats. Everyone laughed a lot and enjoyed the day.

The next day saw a trip to Green Cay for half

of the group while the other half took a hike into the interior of San Salvador. Green Cay, across the water from the field station, had abundant iguanas. The cay is limestone rock and semi-covered with creeping succulents and coarse vegetation. What a wondrous place this is. We all stood on rocks to look for iguanas. We saw none. But wait, they are here. One by one they popped into view. They're on the rocks; under the plants. They were there all the time. We didn't see them because they were still. The colors are reddish/orange/yellow/bluish-mottled mixes of all these. They know not of man's inhumanity. They trust us. Because of that, they might die out.

As they sun themselves I am reminded of the French verb "se Lezarder," to sunbathe, to "lizard" oneself.

The rest of the week was taken up with similar outings, all yielding valuable information.

Amongst others at the convention were Dr. Ron Carter of Loma Linda University, Calif., who will be extracting the DNA from out of the blood



San Salvador iguana, *Cyclura rileyi*, approaching a conference participant. Photograph: Rena Burch



San Salvador iguana basking in sunlight. Photograph: Rena Burch

samples, and Dr. William (Bill) Hayes, Vice President of the I.I.S. These two gentlemen worked tirelessly throughout the trip which, for them, was no vacation although they enjoyed it immensely. They were ably assisted by Carl Fuhri.

Also present were Janet Truse and Deborah Neufeld who run the Iguana Rescue Group. The general public needs to become more aware of how to keep these noble creatures in good health.

Other events at the conference included beautiful nature walks and a couple of tough trips into the interior of the island where there are lakes, jungles, and mangroves, all so far untouched by the hand of man. A few iguanas also exist there, but not many were sighted.

The evenings were given over to lectures in the small auditorium at the field station. There were a good number of biologists and zoologists present, all well known in their fields, and well known to each other. Each one gave a talk that fascinated the rest of the group. It struck me that here, in this lecture hall, was the most enormous amount of brain power gathered together, concentrating on iguanas. A veritable mine of information, a power-house of ideas.

Most fascinating was the showing of a half-

hour film made by Dr. Tom Wiewandt on the Mona Island iguana, *Cyclura cornuta stegneri*. Entitled "An Island Shall a Monster Make," it is probably the only film made that documents the life and times of a rhinoceros iguana.

Our venerable founder and president, Mr. Bob Ehrig, gave a slide show which included good photos of practically all the *Cyclura* species. This was engrossing as these pictures are few and far between and gave everyone a good chance to see the wondrous diversity of the Cycluran species.

In addition there were ordinary iguana owners present. We thank them for their support and hope that they will return next year. All in all it was a most successful conference; we were all in "Iguana Heaven." The best thing about it was that everyone could talk iguanas to everyone else, endlessly, without anyone getting bored and without anyone being told to shut up! This commonly happens when iguana lovers meet up with ordinary social circles!

Our noble, scaly friends will benefit greatly from this convention. The large iguanas are perhaps not doomed after all. Long live the lizards and long live their patrons.



San Salvador iguana among *Sesuvium*, a succulent plant, on Green Cay. Photograph: Rena Burch