

Conservation and Research Project: Utila Iguana

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Introduction

The Utila spiny-tailed iguana is a large iguanid (210 mm SVL) that only occurs on the small Caribbean island of Utila (Islas de Bahía, Honduras). On this island its distribution is limited to the mangrove swamps, which cover approximately one-third of the island. After the rediscovery of *C. bakeri* in 1994 (Köhler 1994 a,b, 1995a), initial research revealed that this species is threatened with extinction. Estimates of

the population size did not exceed several hundred animals. An additional danger to the survival of the species is that the population appears to consist mainly of adult males, while females and juveniles were rarely observed. The main reason for the drastic reduction of the iguana population on Utila is doubtlessly the intensive hunting pressure by the local community. Preferably, locals follow gravid females to the place where they deposit their eggs, in order to obtain the prized iguana eggs. There-



Adult male *Ctenosaura bakeri*, basks on a dead tree limb. Photograph: Gunther Köhler

fore, the main focus of this conservation program is to keep the local people from hunting the iguanas. The enforcement of a year-round ban on hunting, as well as a broad education and information program for the local community are definite and important steps in the right direction. Additional goals of the project are the investigation of the natural history and reproduction of the Utila-iguana as well as the protection of its natural habitat. Also, a survey of the entire herpetofauna of Utila has been started (Köhler 1995b,c, 1996a).

Results from 1996

In 1996, scientific research and conservation measures for the project were carried out during two visits to the island (April 1-30, and 15 September to 9 October).



Public presentation of the spanish version of the TV-documentary "La Iguana de Utila."
Photograph: Gunther Köhler

Thanks to the year-round ban on hunting and the presence of local and foreign iguana conservationists on Utila, the hunting pressure on the Utila-iguana was reduced during 1995 and 1996. Bill Bodden, employed for the project as a full time wildlife ranger since March 1996, is a definite asset to the protection of *C. bakeri*. His motivation and his friendly, problem-solving way of dealing with the people that enter the domain of the Utila-iguana are an invaluable factor in the success of our activities on the island.

A direct result of the reduced hunting pressure on the iguana population can be seen in the increase of juvenile iguanas in July/August 1995 and September 1996, as compared to 1994. Our activities have clearly made it possible for more female iguanas to bury their eggs undisturbed and thus to reproduce.

In 1995, a camera crew of the German public television channel Südwestfunk accompanied the research and conservation team on their assignments. This resulted in a high quality documentary, both in content and visually, that was broadcasted in two 30 minute programs in March 1996 in the series "Abenteuer Überleben (Adventure Survival)." As was agreed upon earlier, the Südwestfunk also produced a Spanish version of this documentary which was presented to the people of Utila in September 1996. Since that date, it has

been broadcast several times on both of the island's TV channels. The reactions of the local people were very positive, in general. The continuous information and education on the uniqueness, significance, and rarity of the Utila-iguana as well as the necessity of conservation measures, going on for over three years now, clearly has had its effects. Because the local community has been closely involved with the project from the beginning, it has not only made the people

realize the significance of *C. bakeri*, it has actually made more and more people proud of this animal that only lives on their island!

The scientific research on habitat, natural history, and reproduction of the Utila-iguana was continued in 1996. Additionally, the veterinarian Peter Ammerman examined the health of two free-living iguanids (*Ctenosaura bakeri* and *Iguana iguana*) as part of his Ph.D. dissertation. His research included parasitology (endo- and ectoparasites), hematology (cytology and clinical-chemical

blood parameters), and virology. The results of this study, the so-called 'normal values' form an important basis for the medical care of iguanid populations living in captivity.

The survey of the herpetofauna of Utila has resulted in addition of nine species to the known herpetofauna of this island, including the description of two new species of anoles (Köhler 1996b,c). Although not as many undescribed species and first records for Utila are to be expected in next couple of years, the herpetofaunal list for the island is still incomplete. For example, a small hylid frog (*Hyla microcephala* [?]) and a large, brown terrestrial snake were sighted but could not be collected. Additionally, the local people have on several occasions reported on "green, slow-moving arboreal lizards with a crown" (*Laemanctus* sp.?) and "red frogs" (?).

Further plans and perspectives

The continuous ban on hunting, from now on also enforced year-round, has already resulted in a slightly better population status for *C. bakeri*. This is in a large part the result of the trustworthiness of the wildlife ranger that was employed by the project. However, there is also some less positive news from Glenn Pedersen (in lit. February 1997), who reports that "more mainlanders are coming to the island every day to live off the island's wildlife." For strict enforcement of the ban on hunting, it is vital that more than one wildlife ranger guard the critical areas. If funding is assured, a second ranger will be employed starting March 1997.

In the annual report of 1995, the importance of a permanent research and breeding station on Utila was stressed. At present, the chances that the funding for the entire project will allow us to realize this station this year, seem hopeful. However, since tourism on Utila has boomed in the last couple of years, no time should be wasted in implementing conservation measures if we want to save the unique flora and fauna of this island. The station will be a base for researchers and conservationists and it will also facilitate an in-situ breeding program for *C. bakeri*. By educating and guiding tourist groups, the station can help in generating funds for financing the conservation project in the long term. One of the members of the project, Miss Elke Blinn, will be a full-time resident of



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Utila starting April 1997. She will be responsible for the local implementation of the projects' goals and objectives.

Furthermore, we intend to organize two annual project-related tours, each lasting two weeks, for anyone interested (Köhler 1996d). These tours will lead naturalists to Utila and selected areas on the mainland of Honduras, for which they will each contribute approximately US \$375, to the Conservation and Research Project Utila Iguana. During these tours, the participants will not only experience the project, the island of Utila, and the different habitats of Central America, at the same time they will also contribute to the protection of an extraordinary and almost extinct animal.

At present, the preparations for the Utila 1997

field trips are in full swing. Between mid-March and late April, European and Honduran researchers will again join hands in examining the biology of the Utila-iguana, and in developing further education and conservation measures, in order to ensure the survival of this species. In August 1997 a second group of people will visit Utila to start construction on the research and breeding station, that is, if funding will be assured by then.


In retrospect, the combined experiences with the project are extremely positive. The extensive support from the people of Utila and from various organizations, both German and foreign, gives a positive outlook on the long term survival of the Utila spiny-tailed iguana and the numerous unique plants and animals of Utila. A permanent station on the island, as planned, would significantly increase the effectiveness and control of our efforts.

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Although they were working under sometimes very harsh field conditions, the TV crew of the Südwestfunk, led by Mr. Eberhard Weiss, Baden Baden, Germany, produced an extraordinary documentary. Both the German and especially the Spanish version of this film are of invaluable importance to the success of this conservation project.

Without these people, institutions and organizations, this research and conservation project could never have taken place in the present form. Many thanks to all. 

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