Vanishing Iguanas

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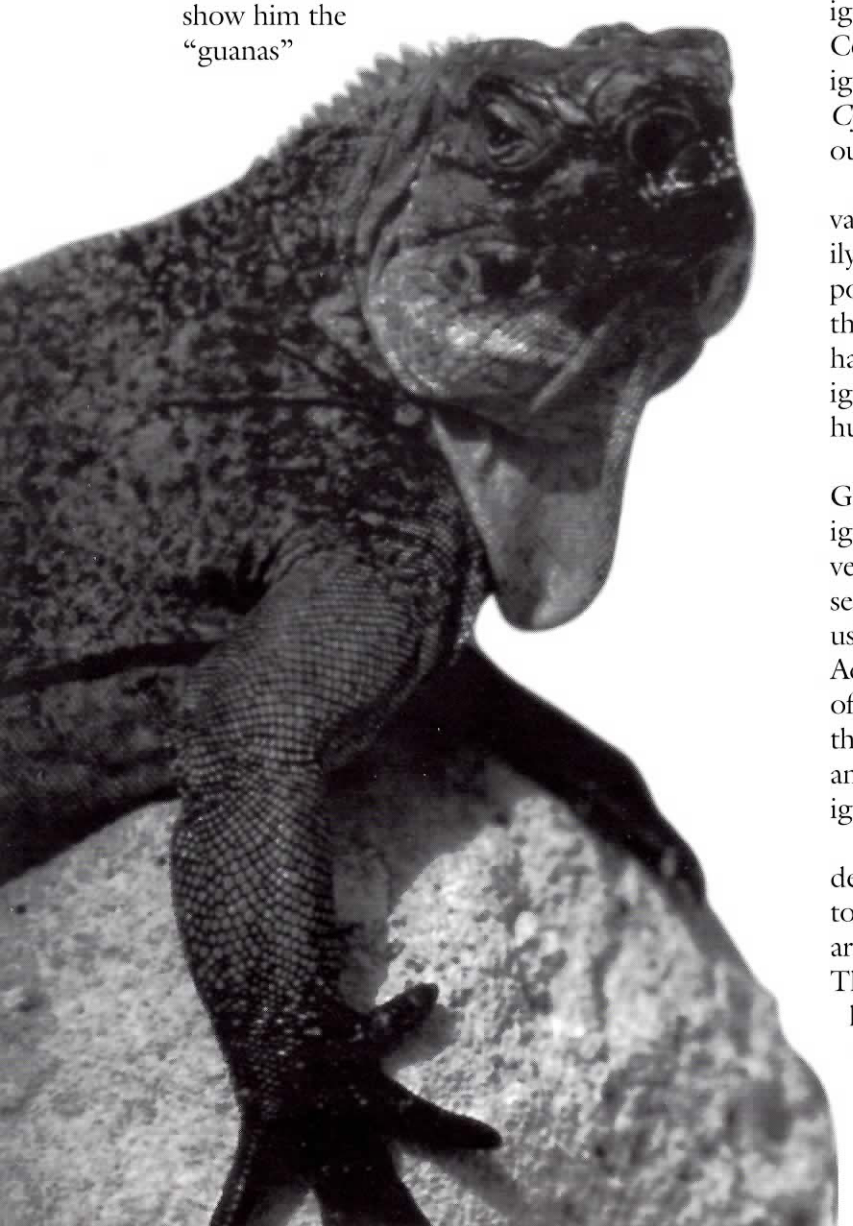
In 1923, Alfred Bailey led a Colorado Museum of Natural History collecting expedition to the Exuma Islands, Bahamas. He added to his itinerary a tiny island called Bitter Guana after hearing stories from the local people about "guanas" living there. Before visiting the cay, he ventured to a picturesque settlement called Black Point. While at the settlement, he noted that the whole town offered to show him the "guanas" on Bitter Guana. After selecting two men, he was on his way.

Scarcely had he reached the shore when he saw his first iguana. He noticed that the iguanas were not wary and there was no difficulty in securing a few specimens for his collection. At the time, Mr. Bailey did not realize that he was collecting a species unknown to the scientific community. Shortly after the expedition, Thomas Barbour described the new iguana and named it *Cyclura figginsi* after the Colorado museum's director, J.D. Figgins. The iguana has since been classified as a subspecies of *Cyclura cychlura* and inhabits seven cays throughout the central and southern Exuma chain.

Mr. Bailey noted that the local people highly value the iguana for food. They told him how easily the iguanas were captured in baited crayfish pots. Apparently the local people had been killing the iguanas for years. Since then many observers have warned of the imminent extinction of the iguanas living on Bitter Guana Cay because of hunting.

Seventy-five years later I journeyed to Bitter Guana Cay during a John G. Shedd Aquarium iguana research expedition aboard our research vessel, Coral Reef II. This expedition was one in a series in our ongoing iguana research program, using the aid of public volunteers. Since 1995, the Aquarium has offered the opportunity for members of the general public to assist with collecting data on the Exuma Island iguana, *Cyclura cychlura figginsi,* and an introduced population of the Allen's Cay iguana, *C. c. inornata.*

Many of Mr. Bailey's seventy-five year old descriptions of Bitter Guana Cay still hold true today. The towering ten-foot cacti with branching arms imbedded with rigid needles are still present. The beautiful powder-white cliff overlooking a long sandy beach crosshatched with purple-flowered railroad vines still exists. However, as



Cyclura cychlura figginsi on White Bay Cay, Bahamas.
Photograph: Chuck Knapp

Left: Looking at the northwest beach on Bitter Guana Cay.

Below: White cliffs of Bitter Guana Cay.

Photographs: Chuck Knapp

I walked the island, I was saddened and concerned by the lack of iguanas. Periodic tracks were seen, but in far fewer numbers than in earlier accounts. The description of iguanas being taken for food was branded into my thoughts. Only seven iguanas have been observed on the island since 1993. In the early 1920's, Mr. Bailey noted taking nineteen iguanas in approximately one hour!

During an earlier Shedd Aquarium iguana research expedition, we received anecdotal information that the people of Black Point, a community of about 200, still hunt the iguanas and do not realize that they are endangered and protected by Bahamian law. In fact, they are apparently being hunted on Bitter Guana because there is a neighboring cay inhabited by iguanas that has signs posted on the beach. The signs advertise the protected status of the iguanas and since Bitter Guana did not share the same signs, it was assumed they were not protected.

It became obvious that signs had to be erected on Bitter Guana to inform the local people about the protected status of the iguanas inhabiting the island. It was also imperative to inform the locals and transient yachtsman about the importance of keeping dogs off the small, iguana-inhabited islands. Dogs are known to kill adult iguanas and tracks are spotted routinely on the beaches of the cay.

Eighteen months and another Shedd Aquarium expedition later, we returned to Bitter Guana to post signs and monitor the precipitous decrease in the iguana population. Shedd Aquarium and Mrs. Sandra Buckner, President of the Bahamas National Trust, generously donated the signs. The signs were assembled by volunteers

aboard the Coral Reef II and cemented on each of the three leeward beaches.

In addition to posting prohibitory signs, we felt it was imperative to visit the settlement of Black Point and speak with the children about the importance of saving their unique iguana living one and two islands to the north. Sandra Buckner, two volunteers, Captain John Rothchild of the Coral Reef II, and I visited the all-ages school at Black Point to give a presentation on endangered species, focusing on iguanas. We were warmly received by the children and faculty. When asked how many children have seen an iguana, approximately one third raised their hands. Sadly, a teacher whispered to a volunteer that most likely the only time a child has seen an iguana was on their plate!

After our presentation we provided the school with West Indian Iguana Posters, donated by the IUCN West Indian Iguana Specialist Group, and a Shedd Aquarium education packet. The children appeared to garner a new appreciation for their endemic iguana, but only time will reveal if their new insights will help prevent poaching in the future.

In addition to posting signs and visiting school children, our team also studied the remaining iguanas inhabiting the cay. In 1997 we discovered an iguana of extraordinary proportions. Weighing approximately thirteen pounds, the iguana appeared to lumber out of the Jurassic. We again spotted and gave chase to this same iguana during the 1998 expedition, but we were unable to catch him. His size, however, coincides with a captured iguana weighing seventeen pounds from a different cay with a very low-density population. The typical size for an iguana living in a high- or medium-density population is approximately three pounds! We have discovered that these iguanas attain gargantuan sizes when in low densities. We postulate that this phenomenon is caused by an increase in their natural food resources, which includes leaves, flowers, and fruits of a variety of plants.

Shedd Aquarium, working with the Bahamas National Trust, will continue to monitor Bitter Guana Cay and the other populations of Bahamian iguanas. Most cays are not readily accessible by researchers; therefore, it is imperative to routinely

Large male *Cyclura cychlura figginsi* on Leaf Cay. An iguana of similar size has been spotted on Bitter Guana Cay. *Photograph: Chuck Knapp*

Right: Warning sign for visitors to Bitter Guana Cay.

Below: Students from the school at Black Point.

Photographs: Chuck Knapp

study the populations to accurately and swiftly detect negative impacts to the islands and their iguana populations. Of equal importance is the contact we make with local people to discuss the conservation and stewardship of their unique iguana species, which is found only in the Exumas and has attracted the attention of scientists and ecotourists as far as 1,200 miles away. With the tangible accomplishments of posting signs and talking to the children, I left Bitter Guana this last time feeling good about our work and the prospects for the iguanas.

The Aquarium's next iguana expedition will be in June of 1999 to the island of Andros. We will attempt to study the mysterious Andros iguana, *Cyclura cychlura cychlura,* on an island that has been described as one of the largest unexplored tracts of land in the Western hemisphere. If you would like information about the expedition, please contact myself or Danielle Dominy, travel program manager, at (312) 692-3317 or ddominy@sheddaquarium.org.