

IGUANA NEWSBRIEFS

Iguana Smugglers Sentenced

November 18, 1999

NEWS RELEASE:

TWO SOUTH FLORIDIANS SENTENCED FOR ILLEGALLY TRAFFICKING IN WEST INDIES TORTOISES AND RARE AND ENDANGERED IGUANAS

Thomas E. Scott, United States Attorney for the Southern District of Florida and Lois J. Schiffer, Assistant Attorney General for the Environment and Natural Resources Division of the United States Department of Justice, announced today that two South Florida residents, DWAYNE D. CUNNINGHAM, 41, and ROBERT A. LAWRACY, 32, were sentenced in federal court in Fort Lauderdale for illegally trafficking in West Indian reptiles protected under domestic and international law in violation of the Lacey Act (the federal law banning wildlife trafficking) and the federal smuggling and conspiracy statutes.

The Honorable Jose A. Gonzalez sentenced CUNNINGHAM to 14 months in federal prison for his role in the illegal smuggling scheme. His co-defendant, LAWRACY, received a sentence of 24 months in prison. Both were also sentenced to supervised release for a period after they serve their prison terms.

CUNNINGHAM and LAWRACY were found guilty in May of conspiring with one another to violate the Lacey Act, the federal smuggling statute and the international treaty known as "CITES," the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of



Fauna and Flora, which is enforced through the endangered Species Act. In addition, CUNNINGHAM was also sentenced on a substantive Lacey Act conviction, for having sold two smuggled Virgin Island Rock Iguanas and LAWRACY was sentenced as a result of being found guilty of importing 49 undersized red-footed tortoises contrary to law.

According to court records and the evidence at trial, from 1992 through 1997 the defendants poached and trafficked in CITES-protected reptile species that originated on various West Indies islands. Several species and sub-species of *Cyclura* (commonly known as Rock or Ground Iguanas), including the White's Cay Rock Iguana and the Exuma Island Rock Iguana, both of which exist only in the Bahama Islands, and the Anegada (British Virgin Islands) Island Rock Iguana, as well as Lesser Antillean Iguanas and red-footed Tortoises, were smuggled into the United States aboard cruise ships touring the West Indies that employed CUNNINGHAM as a comedian and LAWRACY as a dive instructor. The species and sub-species of *Cyclura* are currently threatened with extinction, with wild



Two of the smuggled *Cyclura pinguis* that the defendants stole from Anegada and smuggled into Florida. Photograph: I.I.S.

populations numbering in the low hundreds for the White's Cay and Anegada Rock Iguanas, and are listed on Appendix I of CITES, the highest level of protection available under the international treaty. The Rock Iguanas and Lesser Antillean Iguanas were often marketed for as much as \$1,000 each.

The evidence also established that in an effort to conceal the smuggling of Exuma Island Rock Iguanas, CUNNINGHAM, a former Ringling Brothers Circus clown and entertainer on cruise ships, procured from the United States Fish & Wildlife Service a permit for the "captive breeding" of species listed under the Endangered Species Act to create the impression that his sale of these reptiles stemmed from a viable domestic breeding program rather than the smuggling of wild-caught animals. While some species of Rock and Ground Iguanas have been successfully bred in

captivity, experts testifying at trial noted that the rare species involved in the case were notoriously difficult to propagate in captivity. In fact, the investigating agents determined that of the approximately 20 specimens of one species smuggled by the defendants, the *Cyclura rileyi* from the Bahamas, none survived for more than a relatively brief period in captivity and no off-spring were produced. It was necessary to examine the remains of some of the specimens and conduct DNA testing to establish the actual species of some of the smuggled animals. The President of the Bahamas National Trust testified at trial that public education programs and other conservation efforts in the Bahamas are underway seeking to preserve these unique reptiles, which are featured on a special printing of the Bahamian Dollar, commemorating the 500th anniversary of the discovery of first landfall by

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Columbus in 1492.

In court today the government urged that significant periods of imprisonment result from the convictions, in part due to the substantial numbers of individual specimens illegally taken from some of the small natural populations of these rare species of reptiles. It was argued to the court that although science could not predict whether the loss of so many *rileyi* might doom the species in the future, it could be said with scientific certainty that the loss of so many members of such small populations greatly reduced the genetic diversity of the wild population and placed the species at substantially greater risk of extinction. It was further noted that the United States acts in partnership with the world community in these cases, seeking to preserve the natural heritage of the peoples of the home ranges of these species, such as the Bahamas, who have joined the CITES preservation effort and enacted laws to protect their threatened wildlife.

Mr. Scott commended the Special Agents of the United States Fish & Wildlife Service for their work on this case. Scott, alluding to the multi-billion dollar a year illegal trade in endangered and threatened wildlife, reaffirmed his commitment to the international effort to secure the future of these precious resources by vigorously investigating and prosecuting the poachers and profiteers who disregard the conservation laws and the collectors who fuel the market. Lois J. Schiffer, Assistant Attorney General for the Environment and Natural Resources Division said, "Trafficking in rare species threatens our

environment. We will take whatever steps necessary, here and abroad, to stop the black market in these protected species."

The United States was represented in this matter by Peter Murtha, Senior Trial Attorney, United States Department of Justice, Wildlife & Marine Resources Section and Thomas Watts-FitzGerald, Chief of the Environmental Crimes Section at the United States Attorney's Office in Miami.

Source: U.S. Department of Justice

Wanna' guana?

Island's lizards subject of study

By Terry Allen Williams

Iguanas anyone? Most islanders wish they would just go away. Some are even helping the lizards along.

"They're a pest," said Holly Frazetta-Taylor, who runs and operates Holly's Collectibles in downtown Boca Grande.

"They're all over the place. It's ridiculous. And nobody's doing anything about it. In Pennsylvania they have a deer hunting season. We ought to have an iguana hunting season down here.

"We could arm everybody with BB guns and let people go after them. I understand they make pretty good eating. The tails are supposed to taste like chicken."

This prompted her husband Richard Taylor to break into a verse from a popular song that went something like, "I've been down in Tijuana, even barbecued iguana ..."

As it turns out, there is someone coming to the island who actually wants iguanas. And no, she's not an exterminator.

Liz Pasnak, who works as a Charlotte County 4-H and Wildlife Extension agent, has decided to do an iguana research project in Boca Grande that will begin during the end of May.

Pasnak says that this research will serve as her master's thesis at the University of Florida, and that she intends to map out areas where iguanas are most concentrated on the island and then develop a theory to explain why they are common in some areas and sparse in others.

Pasnak also hopes to determine how future land use changes will affect the number of iguanas on the island.

"It is no wonder the spiny-tailed iguana thrives on the island," said Pasnak. "Except for some climate differences, the Boca Grande habitat is much like the iguana's homeland of coastal Mexico."

Many island residents wish that the iguanas would make their way back to Mexico.

Pasnak said that her initial interest was spurred by a number of "nuisance iguana calls" that she received in the fall of 1996.

"There were quite a few people from Boca Grande who were very upset," she said.

Deb Baker, who lives on Gulf Boulevard, but works at Ruhama's Books in the Sand, said that she sees iguanas on a frequent basis.

Today I went home for lunch at noon and there were three of them. One went up a palm tree, one went under the house, and the other one clawed his way under the deck. I don't know why, but they always have this guilty look in their eyes as if they know they've been doing something bad.

Two summers ago, I had someone watching my house who went out on the deck one day and she said it was like Club Med for iguanas. There must have been 30 of them, lying on the lawn chairs, hanging out, sipping on mixed drinks.

"I've even come home and seen them lying in my bed. That really irritates me."

Janet Thompson has no use for them either.

"Every time I go golfing on the Inn course I see this iguana on the first tee. He hangs out near the maintenance shack on the left. If I hit my ball anywhere near him, I just leave it there. I won't even pick it up. He scares me."

Thompson said that she had heard a rumor that someone who lived on the south end had brought iguanas to the islands as pets and that they had begun to reproduce, a few escaped and the rest, as they say, is history.

No one seems to know for sure how they first got here.

Like many invasive exotic plants, these prehistoric looking animals are not truly indigenous to this area.

Pasnak says that by most accounts, iguanas have been on Gasparilla Island for 20 years, but she has no idea of how they originally came to be here.

Pasnak said that in addition to her study of the iguanas, she will also be researching the relationship between iguanas and the gopher tortoise population.

Iguana feces will be collected to determine their diet, and deceased iguanas will be dissected to examine stomach contents and reproductive status.

Some of Boca Grande's residents have more colorful remedies for the

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iguana situation.

"They could be caught, killed, and stuffed," said Frazetta-Taylor.

"Maybe I could make them into stuffed dolls."

Stuart Hoeckel mentioned the possibility of some kind of iguana round up. "Like they do for rattlesnakes," he said. "We could do the same thing with the iguanas."

Bark Alert

By Dr. Timothy Durkins

There are various bark products on the market that are used by herpers as substrate and for the most part they are safe to use as long as certain precautions are taken. These products should not be used right out of the bag without washing them several times over a period of two weeks until the rinse water runs clear. The dust from these products poses a potential hazard to both herpers and their herps. Once in the vivarium, bark shouldn't be kept wet because pigment will leach out and discolor the animal and may be harmful to the delicate skin of amphibians. Along with dust and pigments, some products may contain highly volatile compounds which, when inhaled, can have a cumulative toxic effect on amphibians.

Investigators from the Vivarium Research Group have also observed depression of the immune system and subsequent death from infection in the rhinoceros iguana (*Cyclura cornuta cornuta*) and in some species of snake housed on bark. Some bark products may also contain mite-sized pests which will swarm over your herp, irritating it. These varmint, once established, are difficult to get rid of and may necessitate removal of

the product and replacement with pre-washed product or other suitable substrate. Particle size can be a problem for some herps. If the wrong grade is used, a herp may accidentally ingest it leading to gut impaction over time, requiring veterinary intervention to save the animal's life. Jagged or sharp edges can puncture or abrade delicate amphibian skin, leading to infection or other dermatologic problems. After washing the product, it should receive a "nose test" for odors and a "squeeze test" to feel for rough edges. The process should be done outside to allow it to outgas properly. Bark derived from such woods as redwood, cedar, aspen and pine are not suitable as substrate due to their highly resinous and aromatic nature. Cypress mulch seems to be relatively inert providing the proper grade is used. To avoid ingestion, always feed in a dish rather than on the substrate.

Reference: On the Use of Bark Substrates in Vivaria. *Vivarium*, Vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 56, 1997. Advanced Vivarium Systems Publications.

Booby Cay Update

By John Bendon

On 20th October 1999 a trip was made to Booby Cay, Mayaguana to continue the research and population assessment of Bartschi's Rock Iguana. Members of IIS, WIISG (West Indian Iguana Specialist Group), and Steve Conners, curator of Miami Metro Zoo, put their money with the \$1000 raised by John Bendon through the sale of T-shirts and iguana drawings to make this trip. Glenn Gerber of the University of Tennessee

began a population assessment. Although this is not yet finished he believes that there are probably more iguanas on the cay than was previously thought. This is promising news as the project to eliminate the rats will probably not get off the ground. The general opinion is that the cay is too large to be able to be covered completely with efficiency and that it would be impossible to know that all the rats are dead. In this case, just a few rats remaining would start up the whole population again within a year. This means a great waste of money and time, both ill-afforded. It was also voiced at the WIISG conference in Puerto Rico last October, that the poison to be used

would be fatal to any birds (and iguanas) that would come into contact with it. Setting thousands of rat traps without poison (which usually works well) is just not feasible.

It was the goats that came to the forefront as the real menace. And attempts to get the Ministry of Agriculture in Nassau to deal with it have met with agreement, though nothing has yet been done. Another trip is planned for the near future.

NEWS OF THE SOCIETY

Dear members,

For the past two years our search for a new Editor-in-Chief of *Iguana Times* has been unsuccessful. As a result, editing and producing four issues of *Iguana Times* per year has been more difficult and time-consuming for the all-volunteer staff. After falling behind in its publication schedule, and in an effort to keep you, our loyal members, satisfied, the staff has decided to label this issue, **Volume 8, Number 1: Spring 2000**, and to forego printing any issues dated 1999. Doing so will help us to publish this journal in a timely fashion.

As long as you have remained a current member of the International Iguana Society you have not missed any issues. Thank you for bearing with us and we apologize for any confusion.

Sincerely,



Joe Wasilewski,
President, I.I.S.