

## UPDATE

# Andros Island Iguana Update: 2001

John Bendon

(from on board the RV Coral Reef II, Middle Bight of Andros)

In May 2001, an expedition led by Chuck Knapp of the John G. Shedd Aquarium in Chicago set out to further investigate the Andros rock iguana (*Cyclura cychlura cychlura*). This trip was part of an ongoing study sponsored by the John G. Shedd Aquarium in collaboration with the Bahamas Department of Agriculture and the Bahamas National Trust. Chuck Knapp is a doctoral student at the University of Florida and a conservation biologist at the Shedd Aquarium. He is conducting his doctoral research on the island and has been leading research expeditions to the area since 1999.

This project is extremely important because virtually nothing is known about the natural history, population sizes, and distribution of this iguana. We do know that feral animals and habitat

loss are pervasive problems on North Andros, and the intricacies of Middle and South Andros are just beginning to become apparent.

We spent twelve days in the field with encouraging results. The original itinerary included venturing south to previously unexplored territory, but the weather was too windy and the seas too rough in the Tongue of the Ocean for the Coral Reef to make its way. This did not have a significant impact because many tracts in the northern portions of the island remain unexplored. We also needed to revisit locations where iguanas had been captured in previous years in order to verify their current status.

We visited six different study sites on an undisclosed cay. At one site, we startled a large yellow-headed iguana and it ran off through the bush.



Male Andros Island Rock Iguana, *Cyclura cychlura cychlura*, showing bead in crest. Photograph: John Bendon





Participants of the Shedd expedition assist Chuck Knapp in processing captured iguanas. *Photograph: John Bendon*

On close inspection, this animal was beginning to dig out the bottom of an active termite mound, presumably to make a nest. Chuck instructed me to observe the mound from behind a bush to document any activity in case the animal returned. Unfortunately, our time was limited, so we had to proceed to our next study location without seeing the animal again. The other five sites on this cay produced both captures and sightings. The landscape suggested that we would have experienced additional successes had the party ventured into different areas along the shore. We hope to visit some of these sites in the future.

Another cay that we visited proved to be so difficult and hazardous that we decided to abandon our search in order to avoid scrapes from thorn bushes and broken limbs from dropping into unexpected solution holes. As we returned to the shore, we spotted iguanas and all thoughts of abandoning our search evaporated. We stayed all

afternoon and managed to capture several iguanas. Cays with difficult access may have larger iguana populations. Terrain that we found daunting also appears to deter hunters.

We observed some interesting iguana behavior during this trip. Iguanas do indeed venture out in bad weather. We found iguanas on dark, windy, and even on some rainy days. In fact, they were easier to catch in relatively cool weather.

One Cay that we visited was reputed to be a place where known iguana hunters frequently camp and collect wood. During our visit, we encountered a couple of men who we had met previously on North Andros during the 2001 International Iguana Society Conference. They claimed to be collecting wood to build a sailboat, but they would undoubtedly catch and kill iguanas for food if they happened to encounter them. This location was very accessible and had very few iguanas, probably due to such opportunistic hunting.




In all, we captured 34 iguanas and sighted many more. Several young iguanas, approximately six months old, were caught, and some cays showed healthy signs of reproduction and recruitment. The Shedd Aquarium plans to continue these research expeditions for some time and hopes to find healthy iguana populations farther south.

The previously mentioned discovery of iguanas digging nests in active termite mounds confirmed observations made in the 1970s by Walter Auffenberg (a University of Florida scientist). We actually found and counted eggs from a mound. Future studies should reveal the reasons for this choice of nesting site. Hopefully, further investigation also will reveal that this magnificent creature, probably the world's largest iguana and certainly the largest extant land vertebrate native to the Bahamas, is not on its way to extinction.

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**Note:** At this stage in the research, populations of *Cyclura cyclura cyclura* should be assumed to be in a precarious state of existence. This study has only begun to address the issue of the continued survival of this species. Support from the appropriate authorities is essential for the continuation of the project. All relevant permits were obtained from Bahamian Government departments, without whose co-operation this work would be impossible. 



Another Andros iguana caught during the Shedd trip displays deep red jowls. *Photograph: John Bendon*