

## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

The 16 species of iguanas in the genus *Cyclura* are among the most endangered animals in the world. For example, fewer than 100 Jamaican Iguanas, *Cyclura collei*, survive, and the spectacular Grand Cayman Blue Iguana, *Cyclura lewisi*, has an estimated population of less than 200.

Each species is faced with its own set of threats although many are common to all. Habitat destruction is at the top of the list, followed closely by the introduction of domestic animals. The West Indian *Cyclura* are the largest land vertebrates native to the islands. Thus, they have evolved no defense mechanisms against predatory carnivores. Dogs regularly kill iguanas, and may or may not eat their victims. Cats kill and eat smaller, younger individuals of even the largest species. The presence of feral dogs and cats on any island inhabited by iguanas virtually assures their demise.

In historical times, Caribbean islanders have utilized uninhabited islands to place goats for grazing. Goats compete with native iguanas for limited resources; they readily reproduce, and have overgrazed many islands, rendering them incapable of supporting iguanas.

Poaching for food or the pet trade poses another threat to native iguanas. Sadly, the conservation of endangered species often occurs only in a court of law — rather than in the islands themselves. As recently as 1999, two defendants from the U.S. were convicted of illegally smuggling *Cyclura rileyi*, *C. figginsi*, and *C. pinguis*, as well as *Iguana delicatissima*, the Lesser Antillean Iguana. No animals as rare as these iguanas are in captivity outside of their respective ranges, thereby automatically defining any of these animals in private collections as illegal.

Where iguanas are hunted for food, local inhabitants often do not understand that these lizards are seriously endangered. Many think that the iguanas exist everywhere and have no idea that some species exist on only a single island! Thus, along with many necessary conservation measures, the only way to ensure the survival of West Indian iguanas is through education. Every school child on the island of Mayaguana (in the Bahamas) has been through a class describing the natural history of the native Booby Cay Iguana, *Cyclura carinata bartschi*. Surveys are presently being conducted on Andros Island

(home of *Cyclura cyclura cyclura*) and “Save the Andros Iguana” t-shirts are given to the local people.

Although West Indian iguanas are critically endangered, the future can be brighter. The Iguana Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has developed an action plan, and many conservation programs are presently being implemented. These are necessary and hopeful signs of progress, but much work remains if we are to ensure the survival of these marvelous animals.

If anyone wishes to support the conservation of iguanas, please contact the International Iguana Society by emailing the IIS Secretary at [ctenosaura@cyclura.com](mailto:ctenosaura@cyclura.com) or by calling 860-236-8203.



Joe Wasilewski  
President, I.I.S.



Joe poses with a young *Cyclura carinata bartschi*. Booby Cay, March 2002. Photograph by John Bendon.