

# The International Iguana Society: The Early Years

Robert Ehrig

## Founding the Society

In 1989, Robert Ehrig approached John Iverson, Thomas Wiewandt, and Albert Schwartz, who, at that time, were considered the world's leading experts on West Indian iguanas. All agreed that an organization specializing in conservation and information devoted entirely to iguanas was appropriate. Richard Montanucci, a *Phrynosoma* (Horned Lizard) expert and a biology professor at Clemson University, agreed to participate in such an organization and edit a possible publication. David Blair, also interested in iguanas, agreed to help. Ehrig, a land manager for the Nature Conservancy, convinced Ross Burnaman, an attorney working for the Wilderness Society, to help with setting up a not-for-profit corporation in the state of Florida. On 2 August 1990, the International Iguana Society (IIS) became a legal entity. Most of the initial board members were either iguana experts or Florida conservationists. All of the above, except Schwartz, served on the

board and David Ehrlich, a veterinarian, agreed to become treasurer. Ehrig provided start-up funds, and in August 1990, convinced Wayne Hill to donate a table at the first Reptile Expo in Orlando. The Society grew by about twenty five members during the two days of the show.

## The Indianapolis Zoo Connection

Julian Duval, an original IIS board member, was Director of the Indianapolis Zoo. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, this was the only zoo that had worked much with *Cyclura*. In fact, both *C. nubila* and *C. cornuta* had bred successfully at the Zoo. Today, Indianapolis is still the only zoo to have bred *C. n. lewisi*. In addition, two *C. ricordii* were hatched there (*IT*, Vol. 3(2)). Jeff Lemm, a talented photographer, and Bill Christy were early Indy friends of the IIS. Bill Christie would later go on to study *C. ricordii* in the Dominican Republic on behalf of the Indianapolis Zoo. Gordon Burghardt also was friendly and helpful to the early IIS, and still serves on the Advisory Board.

## Conferences

In 1993, the IIS held its first conference in the Florida Keys with Tom Wiewandt as the keynote speaker. Over seventy people attended the program at the Hidden Harbor Turtle Hospital. A second conference was held in 1994 in the Florida Keys with John Iverson as the keynote speaker.

In 1995, the IIS held its first international conference in the Bahamas at the Bahamian Field Station



Robert Ehrig shows a spiny-tailed iguana (*Ctenosaura pectinata*) to kids and their moms at the first IIS public meeting on Big Pine Key in 1991. Photograph by Laurel Ehrlich.



Richard Montanucci during the *Cyclura rileyi* Research Expedition, Exuma Islands, May 1993. Fifty iguanas were captured, measured, weighed, and released at the exact spot where they were captured. Photograph by Richard Moyroud.

on San Salvador (*IT*, Vol. 4(4)). A contingent of over thirty attendees heard talks by a large group of experts and helped Bill Hayes by supplying “herds” of field assistants investigating *C. rileyi* on all but one of the islands in San Salvador where they occur. The IIS had helped train and was responsible for bringing together many of the people who would conduct research and start conservation projects for iguanas throughout the region.

### The Iguana Times

The *Iguana Times* has become the publication from which both the academic and the hobbyist would get much of their iguana-related information. Thirty-six issues have been published to date, and the journal remains the single largest source of information on iguanas of all kinds. The *Iguana Times* has always featured and stressed the impor-



Participants in the first IIS Conference, Bahia Honda State Park, Sandspur Beach, Florida Keys. *IIS* photograph.

tance of active conservation. Habitat protection and enforcement of protective laws were foremost priorities in efforts to assure the protection and survival of these magnificent creatures.

For many years, the IIS was basically the only clearinghouse for iguana information. The Society was distributing free iguana care sheets at herp meetings and expos. By 1995, when we stopped counting, we had distributed over 16,000 sheets. The IIS also supported several iguana rescue groups. The largest was run for many years by Deborah Neufeld, the first female IIS Board member, and Jan Truse in Kissimmee, Florida. They found homes for over 250 iguanas and encouraged new owners to become IIS members. By 1994, IIS membership was close to seven hundred.

## A LEGACY OF CONSERVATION PROJECTS

### Jamaican Iguanas

In 1990, Ehrig traveled twice to the Hellshire Hills in Jamaica to assist with the conservation project being developed for the newly rediscovered Jamaican Iguana, *Cyclura collei* (*IT*, Vol. 1(1)). Ehrig showed Edwin Duffus, the hog hunter who had made the initial “rediscovery,” how he tracked iguanas from droppings and an occasional tail drag. The IIS also identified the first of two nesting areas. By the following fall, Edwin Duffus had not been hired by the Jamaican Iguana Project. The IIS donated funds to employ him for a short time. He also was paid for his trips into Hellshire with Ehrig and company. This was at a time when Dr. Peter Vogel of the University of the West Indies was just beginning his impressive research on the Jamaican Iguana, which continues today.



Finca Cyclura was the office and home base of the IIS during the first five years of the organization's existence. It also served as the home of numerous Rock Iguanas (*Cyclura* spp.) in spacious habitat enclosures and a few individuals that had the run of the place. In the early 1990s, scores of "iguanaphiles" visited Finca Cyclura. In 1993, Wendy Townsend spent several days getting to know the residents. Her favorite was a Rhinoceros Iguana (*Cyclura cornuta*) named Mao. This session also led to the Society's first t-shirt ad. Photograph by Robert Ehrig.

### Cayman Island Iguanas

In 1991 representatives from the Cayman National Trust visited the Nature Conservancy in the Florida Keys. The Conservancy had received some donated land on Cayman Brac that was transferred to the Trust. That parcel has since become the center of a nature reserve. During a visit to Grand Cayman in April 1991, Ehrig helped to evaluate the Salinas Reserve, which is owned by the Trust (*IT*, Vol. 1(4)). During this visit, Ehrig examined all seven of the *Cyclura nubila lewisi* that were in captivity at the time. A deal was brokered with an attraction that held the only captive female on the island. A private individual traded a male to the attraction for the female, which was transferred to the Trust in hopes of establishing an effective breeding facility. Subsequently, the IIS facilitated the acquisition of the first wild caught female by the Trust. Sara became the best breeder the project has ever had.

### Bahamian Iguanas

In June and August 1991, the IIS traveled to North Andros after receiving word that some iguanas might still be on the island (*IT*, Vol. 1(6)). Several surveys established the fact that popula-



Gloria Estefan, internationally known entertainer, meets Chuck, a working Cuban Iguana (*Cyclura nubila*). The Cuban singer gave the IIS permission to use this photograph on the back cover of the *IT* (Vol. 5(2)). Photograph by Joe Wasilewski.

tions of iguanas were extant, and that miles and miles of suitable habitat remained. Subsequently, throughout the early 1990s, the IIS conducted vegetation surveys on 14 Bahamian islands that either supported iguana populations or had done so in the past. These investigations established that iguanas were responsible for enhancing their own habitat.

The IIS has installed six signs in the Bahamas to inform the boating public that iguanas are protected and that they are herbivorous. The signs in the Allen's Cays in the northern Exumas were installed ten years ago (*IT*, Vol. 1(5)). They have been viewed by tens of thousands of visiting boaters. The signs on Green Cay in the San Salvador complex, home to *C. rileyi*, are in both English and French (the language of most of the visitors from the nearby Club Med). These were installed in 1995. The signs cost about US \$230.





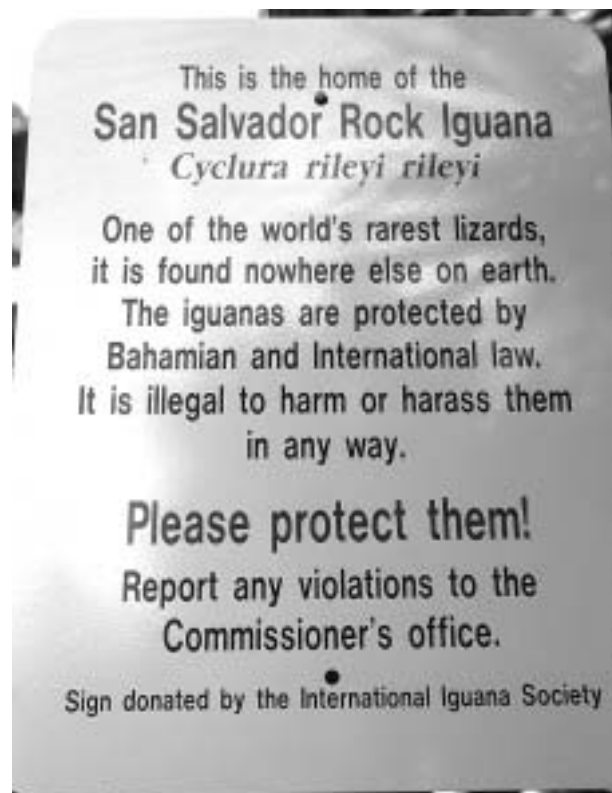
Iguana sign on the Allen's Cays, Exuma Islands, Bahamas.  
 Photograph by Robert Ehrig.

All were installed on heavy steel posts in 80+ pounds of cement. The logistics of these installations were complicated, primarily due to the difficulties associated with transporting materials and fresh water in small boats. IIS volunteers did all of the work. The signs were expected to last a decade or more and, based on public responses, have proven to be good investments.

In 1993, Ron Harrod, a former pilot, photographer, and captain of a 38-foot trawler, the *VSV Essence*, provided the IIS with a navy for a good part of that year. The IIS initiated the first study of a *C. rileyi* population in the Exumas in late May and conducted a number of iguana habitat surveys (*IT*, Vol. 4(2)). During this time, bipedal jousting by young males was observed and recorded; this is a behavior that had never been seen before — or since. A survey of the *C. cyclura figginsi* introduced Chuck Knapp, now an IIS Advisory Board member, to iguana fieldwork (*IT*, Vol. 4(3)).



Marcie Ehrig with an iguana sign on the Allen's Cays, Exuma Islands, Bahamas, March 1992. In the early years, Marcie maintained the membership roster, mailed the *Iguana Times*, sold t-shirts, and proof-read IIS publications — she also cooked some very fine food for participants in the first two IIS conferences. Photograph by L. Aurenhammer.



English language sign on Green Cay, San Salvador, Bahamas. Photograph by Joe Wasilewski.



Left: San Salvador iguana, *Cyclura rileyi*. Photograph by Rena Burch.



Above: Bipedal jousting by young male *Cyclura rileyi*. Photograph by Richard Moyroud.



Above: Richard Moyroud holds a *Cyclura rileyi* during the May 1993 research expedition aboard the "Essence," Exuma Islands, Bahamas. Photograph by Robert Ehrig.



A badly emaciated rhinoceros iguana, *Cyclura cornuta*, confiscated from a South Florida reptile dealer during a U.S. Fish & Wildlife raid. This animal survived, as did 12 others adopted by IIS volunteers cooperating with authorities that helped put an end to rampant smuggling of *Cyclura* into the U.S. IIS photograph.

On Mayaguana, in the far eastern Bahamas, the IIS has offered US \$1000 to build a goat coral for residents in order to facilitate the removal of goats from Booby Cay and enhance the likelihood of survival of *C. carinata bartschi* (*IT*, Vol. 6(1)). That story continues today.

### Smuggled Iguanas

At the end of 1993, several unscrupulous Florida reptile dealers were offering smuggled *C. rileyi* and *C. cyclura figginsi* for sale. The IIS called this sad fact to the attention of the reptile community and urged them not to buy these illegal animals (*IT*, Vol. 3(1)). The IIS was the first and, for a very long time, the only herp organization to publicize the plight of the critically endangered *Cyclura* that were being smuggled. The IIS also made both Bahamian and U.S. authorities aware of the problem. This IIS action caused smuggled iguanas to become a commodity with an extremely small market. In addition, many herpers became aware of the tremendous damage to which wild populations were being subjected.

### Financial Support

The IIS gave early financial support to the Utila Iguana Program to fund an iguana warden when *Ctenosaura bakeri* was given legal protection. The Iguana Verde project in Costa Rica has also received support.

The IIS has lobbied governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations for help in enhancing the chances for survival of many species. The IIS also has provided incentives and rewards to individuals who help protect iguanas. The Society gave its first Conservation award to Mr. Edwin Duffus of the Jamaican Iguana Project for his many years of service protecting the Jamaican Iguana. Edwin received \$100 and a Dolly Parton tape to play during many lonely nights in the Hellshire Hills.

