

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

The past few years have taken me throughout the Caribbean to work with various species of Rock Iguanas. I have been stamped by Allen's Cays Iguanas (*Cyclura cyblura inornata*), had the privilege of releasing Jamaican Iguanas (*Cyclura collei*) in the Hellshire Hills, and have observed a female Andros Island Iguana (*Cyclura cyblura cyblura*) guard her termite mound nest.

The most difficult and emotional experience I have had in all this time was a week spent searching for the Grand Cayman Blue Iguana (*Cyclura nubila lewisi*). The *Iguana Times* has been publishing reports on this animal for a number of years (including one in our previous issue). This is arguably the most spectacular species in the genus *Cyclura*. It can reach five feet in length, and, under the proper conditions, its coloration is sky blue and its eyes are deep red.

In June 2002, Fred Burton, Alberto Jaramillo, Joel Friesch, and I began a second survey of the Island to cover areas where iguanas had been sighted previously. We also targeted areas containing suitable habitat, which had never been surveyed. Six ten-hour days were spent searching for iguanas or any sign of iguanas. Although Grand Cayman has up to a million visitors every year, Fred assured me that absolutely no one travels in the areas we were searching.

We surveyed working farms, along with historic (long abandoned) farms, pasture land, and recently bulldozed plots. The team also checked whatever pristine habitat remains on Grand Cayman. Many safety measures were implemented to avoid the kind of near-fatal accident that occurred during an earlier survey. Fred held daily briefings, and each member of

the team had a hand-held GPS and compass, along with a map of the survey area.

Most people have heard of Poison Ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*), but who has heard of Maiden Plum (*Comocladia dentata*)? This noxious plant thrives in many of the areas we were to survey, and brushing against one makes Poison Ivy feel mild. Participants were advised to wear long sleeved shirts, long pants, and boots. Some areas consisted of razor sharp pinnacle rock, and other areas grew vegetation so thick that it would take thirty minutes to walk ten yards.

All of the harsh conditions would have been forgotten with the sighting of a single iguana.

However, no iguanas were seen in any habitat other than on roads and rock piles, and these animals were one- and two-year olds. Several sightings of tail drags and scat were also documented. On the down side, regardless of how far inland the team traveled, indications of dogs, cats, and rats were abundant. Rats destroy eggs, cats kill young iguanas, and dogs take sport in killing adult iguanas. Such condi-

tions do not bode well for the Blue Iguana.

Farm workers, when questioned, reported that iguanas used to be seen with regularity but had not been spotted for some time. One farmer raised our hopes when he reported a pair of adult iguanas residing in the area. This was a farm where two young animals were seen. The male iguana, he claimed, was the size of a donkey. We decided that it must have been a small donkey.

By the end of the week, we were painfully aware that we were working with a species that was functionally extinct in the wild. Although the captive population is producing offspring, no safe haven exists for their release. The only hope is to



Fred Burton and Alberto Jaramillo. Photograph by Joe Wasilewski

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Two of the very few "wild" iguanas observed during our survey.
Photograph by Joe Wasilewski

purchase land to set aside for national parks and preserves. Once purchased, fences will need to be erected to exclude feral animals. An advantage of this system is that many other endemic plants and animals also need these natural areas in order to survive.

Don't think you are just one voice in conserving the remaining wildlife resources of the world. You can do a lot, and just by joining the IIS you have begun a positive process. Tell your friends and recruit more members for the sake of wildlife conservation.

Join us for our 2003 IIS conference in Utila, Honduras. You will have the honor of working with the extremely rare Utila Spiny-tailed Iguana (*Ctenosaura bakeri*). Join people of similar interests, along with experts in the field providing lectures on their work with many rare and endangered species of iguana.



Alberto and Joe. *Photograph by Fred Burton*

Joe Wasilewski
I.I.S. President