



Tales from the “Iguana Girl”: An Anecdotal Account of Puerto Ricans’ Interactions with and Perceptions of Invasive Green Iguanas (*Iguana iguana*)

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I talk about Green Iguanas (*Iguana iguana*) a lot. I could eat, I sleep, and breathe all things Green Iguana and it would still not be enough. I started my master’s project without knowing where Green Iguanas come from, what they eat, or how it feels to hold one (Fig. 1). I went on an unexpected journey that would change all that, one that would include people from many different walks of life. I learned from hunters, farmers, wildlife professionals, volunteers, and students how



Fig. 1. Before I became the “Iguana Girl,” researcher Wilfredo Falcón attempted to persuade me to hold a female Green Iguana on the island of St. Thomas. Photograph by the manager of Ana’s Retreat.



Fig. 2. A Green Iguana (*Iguana iguana*) from Dorado on the northern shore of Puerto Rico. Photograph by the author.

invasive Green Iguanas (Fig. 2) affect their lives. With population estimates to as many as 223 individuals per hectare (Arce-Nazario and Carlo 2012; but see López-Torres et al. 2012), Green Iguanas are a ubiquitous presence throughout the island. Although the Stout Iguana (*Cylura pinguis*) was once thought to have occurred on the main island (Thomas and Joglar 1996) and an introduced population of Cuban Iguanas (*C. nubila*) has been present on Isla Magüeyes off the southern coast of Puerto Rico since the 1960s (Rivero 1998), Puerto Ricans continue to have problems with these culturally foreign Green Iguanas. However, now that I’m at the other end of my dissertation, I’m no longer a stranger to

the world of the Green Iguana. In fact, nowadays more than a few people know me as the “Iguana Girl.”

The Farmers and Their Defenders

To complete my thesis research on the origin of the invasive Green Iguana in Puerto Rico, I had to collaborate with strang-

ers. For my project, I was required to amass what seemed an impossible 200 tissue samples from throughout the island. There was absolutely no way I could collect all of those on my own. The need to sample broadly meant I had to become a person who would ask anyone and everyone for a favor.

I began the search for help by using Facebook. I sat down in front of my computer and typed in the words “Gallina de Palo” in the search bar; “Gallina de Palo,” which translates directly as “Chicken of the Trees,” is the common name for Green Iguanas in Puerto Rico. To my surprise, I quickly found a group of very tough looking men known as Los Iguaneros de Aguada (Fig. 3; see also: <https://www.facebook.com/Los-Iguaneros-de-Aguada-PR-349437615184740/>).

The Iguaneros are iguana hunters who help farmers having difficulty with this agricultural pest. I sent the group a message detailing my work, and was delighted to find they were happy to help me reach my goal.

A few months later, I met Los Iguaneros de Aguada on a dusty road early in the morning on the Finca de Palmas farm (Fig. 4) in the southern town of Santa Isabel. We greeted and sized each other up. “Are you the iguana girl?” one of them asked as we shook hands. “Yes, yes I am,” I replied. Full of welcoming smiles and laughter, they were much less menacing in real life than they appeared in their online photos. Their green camouflage gear intrigued me, as they dressed in attire one would expect of a person going to war. But to them, they are fighting a war. “We defend agriculture,” they proclaimed. There, along the endless rows of plantain and banana trees, Los Iguaneros de Aguada were fighting to maintain food security, our economy, and, more locally, that farmer’s livelihood.

After the introductions, we climbed into the back of a flatbed trailer (Fig. 5) pulled by a tractor and made our way along the dusty dirt road to a ravine that cut through the farmer’s land (Fig. 6). Ravines are prime iguana real estate. They

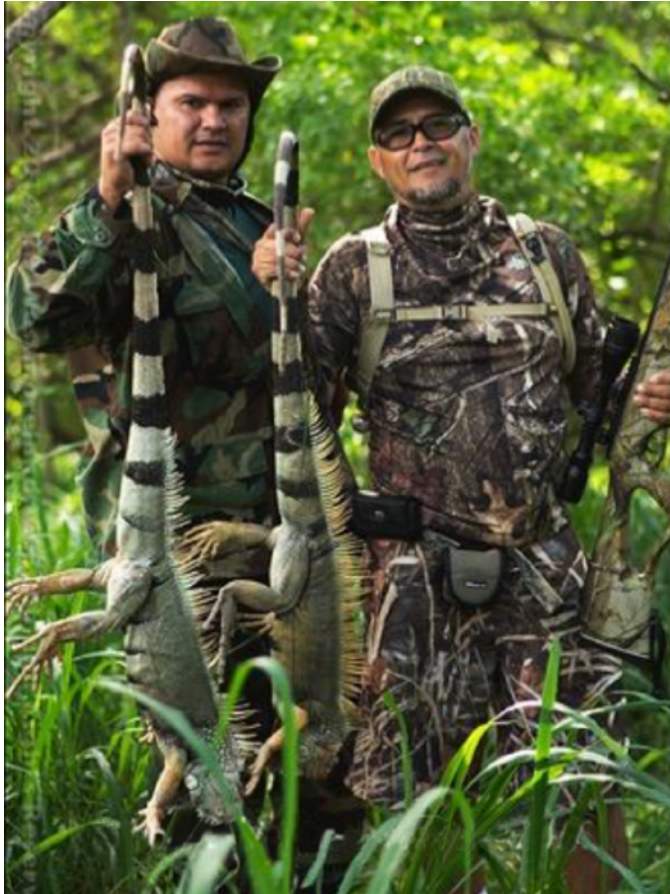


Fig. 3. Los Iguaneros de Aguada in full camouflage gear with their bounty. Photograph by Robert Westmoreland.



Fig. 4. The Finca de Palmas farm in Santa Isabel where I first met the iguana hunters. Photograph by Robert Westmoreland.



Fig. 5. The iguaneros riding a flatbed trailer on their way to the hunting site. The flatbed would later be filled with a huge pile of dead iguanas. Photograph by Robert Westmoreland.



Fig. 6. The hunting site. A ravine and a small river parallels the road just beyond the trees (*Pithecellobium unguis-cati*) on the right. Photograph by Robert Westmoreland.

have trees for basking, water to drink, and walls of soft soil in which to nest. Unfortunately, this farmer had attempted to grow Papaya (*Carica papaya*) along this ravine, providing the enormous green lizards with plenty of food. I would later learn from this experience and from many other farmers that iguanas adore papaya seedlings and could eat multiple rows in less than a day. This is a big problem since the lizards end up eating thousands of dollars of potential revenue.

Once we arrived at the ravine, we got off the flatbed and walked toward the edge of the ravine. About twelve men approached the unsuspecting Green Iguanas and began to shoot. Loud thuds from their 0.12-mm pellet rifles filled the air and the Green Iguanas hit the ground. In about two hours, the hunters had culled over one hundred iguanas. A large pile of cold Green Iguana carcasses was stacked on the back of that flatbed. Although I only needed 25 samples from that



Fig. 7. The “Iguana Girl” taking samples of Green Iguana muscle tissues at the Santa Isabel farm. Photograph by Robert Westmoreland.

site, I came away with a few more (Fig. 7). We rode back on the flatbed, surrounding the mound of dead iguanas and recounted the victories of the day (Fig. 8). We were done by lunch.

In Puerto Rico’s current crippling economy, farmers have to worry about yet another challenge threatening their livelihoods. Farmers, like the one we visited that day, see the iguanas as a menace. Rightfully so, as another farmer in the town of Guánica later shared with me that he had lost four rows of Papaya to iguana herbivory, costing him over two thousand dollars. If we could quantify the potential loss caused by these animals across the island, it would be much more than a few thousand dollars.

The Environmental Interpreter and the Volunteers

Among the many people who joined me on my research adventure were representatives of governmental agencies and affiliated volunteers, most notably, a very enthusiastic environmental interpreter named Carlos Andres Rodríguez Gómez from the Puerto Rico Conservation Trust. Carlos completed his master’s research in the Cabezas de San Juan Nature Reserve by initiating an astounding management effort focused on controlling the growing iguana populations in the reserve. This site was of particular interest to me, since it was ground zero for the iguana populations on the island. One of the first ever-recorded populations on the island was at this site in 1978 (Rivero 1998). When I told Carlos about my project, he became very excited about including “his iguanas” to determine their origin. I asked Carlos, at that time a stranger: “Can you sample the iguanas for me?” And Carlos, savvy as he is, replied with the offer: “Do you want to volunteer?”



Fig. 8. The Iguaneros de Aguada and the “Iguana Girl.” Photograph by Robert Westmoreland.

I accepted his offer and had a wonderful experience volunteering to help manage the iguana populations in the reserve. The first time I joined Carlos and the volunteers, we set out to dig up iguana eggs. In the reserve, Carlos and his team dig iguana eggs out of their nests in an effort to control the growing population. At our first dig site, we found no iguana eggs (Fig. 9), but did come upon pieces of clay pots from our pre-Columbian indigenous ancestors.



Fig. 9. The first site at the Cabezas de San Juan Nature Reserve where we dug for iguana eggs. Quadrants (1.0 m²) and flags mark the digging site. We found pieces of pottery, but no iguana eggs. Photograph by Carlos Andres Rodríguez Gómez (Puerto Rico Conservation Trust).

I said to Carlos with a piece of rounded clay in my hand: “What’s this?”

“That’s a piece of pottery, there are many here,” he replied.

“Really?” I inquired with amazement; I had never felt more like an archaeologist.

“Yes, however, the iguanas are messing it up.”

“How so?” I asked.

“When they dig their nests, they mix the layers of dirt and mess up the strata so that we can’t tell to what era the clay pottery dates.”

“That’s terrible,” I replied.

“Yeah,” he said as he threw the piece of pottery back into our growing dirt pile.

I added “possible threat to the history of the island” to my growing list of Green Iguana facts.

After digging unsuccessfully, we filled the holes and moved on. At the new location, we finally managed to find some eggs. The other volunteers were, as I found out, veterans at digging eggs (Fig. 10). We ended up excavating 320 eggs in one day (Fig. 11) but still didn’t make a dent in the population. Since that dig in 2013, Carlos has continued digging up eggs with his volunteers and is still pulling big numbers (Fig. 12).

Following my volunteer work with Carlos, I decided to spread the word about the negative effects of invasive species. I began by giving talks at local high schools. Although these were always great experiences, those that stood out most were the talks I gave at my old high school (Fig. 13). I would arrive in the classroom and with my PowerPoint presentation projected on the wall behind me, I’d proudly announced, “I am a Master’s student in biology at the University of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras. I too went to this high school.”



Fig. 10. Volunteers looking for Green Iguana eggs at the second digging site. Photograph by Carlos Andres Rodríguez Gómez (Puerto Rico Conservation Trust).



Fig. 11. Counting Green Iguana eggs found at the second dig site. Eggs in each clutch were counted and logged in forms used by the reserve and for Carlos Andres' project. Photograph by Carlos Andres Rodríguez Gómez (Puerto Rico Conservation Trust).

To my surprise, the students were very interested in what I had to say. We talked about invasive species, how to prevent and control them, the danger of the pet trade, about careers in biology, and what it meant to go to a university. I explained to them how farmers on the island were losing their crops



Fig. 12. Project leader Carlos Andres (far right on the back row) with the volunteers. The bucket contained 320 eggs found that day at only one site. Photograph by Carlos Andres Rodríguez Gómez (Puerto Rico Conservation Trust).



Fig. 13. The “Iguana Girl” giving a talk about invasive species to the tenth grade (15 year-old students) at her old high school, the Escuela Pedro Falú Orellano in Río Grande, Puerto Rico. Photograph by the author.

to Green Iguanas; I retold my experience with the hunters who help them. I encouraged the students to volunteer with Carlos, and described what their job would be as a part of the nature reserve’s team. To my continued surprise the kids

remembered me when I went back the second year, “You’re the iguana girl, right?” a boy yelled at me from the hall. “Yes, yes I am.”

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