



NEWS BRIEFS

A Growing Illicit Trade Threatens Jamaica's Wildlife¹

Conservationists are beginning to fear that as demand grows for rare and exotic wildlife, Jamaican authorities will be unable to protect the island's natural treasures. Local wildlife is commonly offered for sale to tourists across the island and the National Environment and Planning Agency (NEPA), which is responsible for protecting natural resources, has recently admitted to receiving "intelligence" regarding the illicit wildlife trade.

The agency says it is strengthening its enforcement capabilities and increasing general awareness of the value of local biodiversity. A specialized arm of the police enforces environmental laws. Another tool to counter the trade is the 2010 State of the Environment Report, which provided an overview of the state and quality of the island's natural heritage and, according to NEPA, helps with sustainable management of Jamaica's natural and physical environment.

A variety of other programs and initiatives also aim to protect Jamaican biodiversity. The Sea Turtle Monitoring Project, a partnership between NEPA and community-based and non-governmental organizations, educates people about sea turtles and protects them while they are nesting on the island. A few miles outside the popular tourist town of Negril,



Jamaican Skinks (*Spondylurus fulgidus*; top) and Blue-tailed Galliwasp (*Celestus duquesneyi*; bottom) are very rarely encountered as a consequence of predation by introduced Small Indian Mongooses (*Urva auropunctata*). Photographs courtesy of the Jamaican Iguana Recovery Group.

¹ Adapted from a story by Zadi Neufville, Inter Press Service News Agency on 12 March 2012, with additional information provided by Byron Wilson, Jamaican Iguana Recovery Group.



Despite some success in repatriating head-started Jamaican Iguanas (*Cyclura collei*), once thought to be extinct, these extremely rare lizards still are threatened by habitat destruction from illegal logging and charcoal burning. Photograph courtesy of the Jamaican Iguana Recovery Group.

members of the Bluefields Bay Fishermen's Friendly Society have, after a decade of work, successfully curtailed the poaching of turtles from the fishing beaches in Bluefields Bay. "In the past, we would regularly pick up the shells of butchered turtles from the beach," spokesman Wolde Cristos told IPS. "Last year there were none and we have not found any dead turtles so far this year. We also protected 40 nests and guided 1,500 baby turtles to the sea," he said.

Despite the initiatives, Jamaica slipped more than a dozen places on the Environmental Performance Index: From 54th out of 149 countries in 2008 to 89th of 163 countries in 2011. The 2012 EPI ranks Jamaica 63rd out of 132 countries. Byron Wilson, a scientist at the University of the West Indies (UWI), told IPS that problems are exacerbated by "the deplorable attitude of many Jamaicans toward wild-

life.” Habitat destruction from illegal logging and charcoal burning, poaching, and associated corruption and a lack of enforcement are some of the main threats to Jamaican wildlife, according to Wilson, who heads the Jamaican Iguana Recovery Group.

In 15 years, the project has multiplied the number of breeding female iguanas at monitored communal nesting sites from eight in 1991 to 33 in 2011 by removing hatchlings from the wild. The baby lizards are raised at the Hope Zoo in Kingston until they are big enough to fend off non-native predators, after which they are repatriated back into the Hellshire Hills. Despite these efforts, iguanas might not have escaped smugglers; aside from individuals sent to U.S. zoos for breeding purposes, some of the extremely rare lizards may certainly have been smuggled out of the country.

A growing number of private menageries also threaten wildlife, in addition to increasing instances of tourists placing orders for rare species. The shopping lists often include Hawksbill, Leatherback, and freshwater Jamaican Slider Turtles, Jamaican Boas, and American Crocodiles, all of which are protected species. “The enforcement of laws is totally inadequate. Rangers monitor only the fringes and



Small Indian Mongooses (*Urva auropunctata*) were introduced into Jamaica during the 19th Century in a misguided effort to control invasive rats in sugarcane fields. Despite localized efforts to control them, such as trapping in the Hellshire Hills, these efficient predators have wrought havoc with ground-dwelling lizards and snakes, causing the extinction of several taxa and dramatic reductions in the numbers of many others. Photograph courtesy of the Jamaican Iguana Recovery Group.



Humans continue to invade and degrade even remote habitats. Here, a charcoal kiln is clearly evident in the Hellshire Hills, which have been described as one of the last substantial areas of primary, undisturbed dry forest in the West Indies. Photograph courtesy of the Jamaican Iguana Recovery Group.



The Jamaican Coney (*Geocapromys brownii*), also known as the Jamaican Hutia, is one of the few non-volant endemic West Indian mammals that have survived in the face of invasive competitors and predators. Photograph courtesy of the Jamaican Iguana Recovery Group.

roads in protected areas,” said Wilson, who also noted that corruption might be driving the illicit trade. The idea is unsurprising given that Jamaica ranked 86th out of 186 countries on the 2011 Global Corruption Perception Index.

Jamaica’s rich biodiversity makes it fifth in the world in terms of plant endemism. Unfortunately, 37 Jamaican species are on the 2010 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Fifty-two species of animals are threatened and 209 plant species are at-risk. The island ranks high on the Red List for animals at risk of extinction. “We have one of the rarest lizards in the world, and we could lose it,” Wilson lamented.

Rare Philippine Turtles Returned Home¹

In many parts of Asia, turtles represent longevity and good luck, and that’s certainly true for 18 rare smuggled turtles that were returned from Hong Kong to their native Philippines. Philippine Wildlife Bureau head Mundita Lim says the turtles were confiscated at the Hong Kong airport in February from a Chinese student, along with 13 Asian Box Turtles (*Cuora amboinensis*). Five other turtles did not survive to make the trip home.

The critically endangered Philippine Pond Turtles (*Siebenrockiella leytensis*) live only in forest streams on Palawan Island southwest of Manila. The Swiss-based International Union for the Conservation of Nature described the 21-centimeter turtle as one of the rarest and least-known turtles in the world. Only about 120 remain in the wild. Lim says they are prized as novelty pets in the international animal trade or as food by local villagers.

¹ Adapted from reports by the Associated Press and Agence France-Press.

The 20-centimeter Asian Box Turtle is listed as “vulnerable” in the Philippines, although it is also found in other tropical countries of southeastern Asia.

Philippine officials took the unprecedented step of traveling to Hong Kong and retrieving the turtles because they are so rare. Palawan’s governor received them at the Manila airport. The 18 turtles will be rehabilitated before being released in the wild.

The Chinese smuggler was arrested at Hong Kong International Airport on 8 February after the turtles were found in his luggage. He was charged and fined HK\$8,000 (US\$1,000) under local laws aimed at protecting endangered species.

Trafficking in pond turtles is punishable by a six-year prison term and a million-peso (US\$23,447) fine in the Philippines, reported Luz Corpuz, deputy wildlife chief of the Philippine environmental department, admitting, however, that the government did not have enough resources to consistently enforce the law.



Eighteen critically endangered Philippine Pond Turtles (*Siebenrockiella leytensis*) were confiscated in Hong Kong and returned to the Philippines in April of this year. Photograph courtesy of the Turtle Conservancy.

Puerto Rico: Please Eat Iguanas¹

Puerto Rico needs to get rid of 4 million invasive Green Iguanas (*Iguana iguana*), some of which can grow to 1.8 m in length. Short of passing a law requiring every man, woman, and child on the island to eat an iguana, what can you do about that many unwanted critters? Puerto Rico is taking what is probably the most lucrative option: Rounding them up, slaughtering them, and exporting the meat to the United States.

¹ Adapted from an article by Jess Zimmerman, [http://grist.org/list—6 February 2012](http://grist.org/list—6-February-2012)



Invasive Green Iguanas (*Iguana iguana*) can be encountered almost anywhere in Puerto Rico, including the island’s famous beaches where the lizards bask and lay their eggs. Photograph by Rafael L. Joglar.



Puerto Rico’s Department of Natural Resources is implementing a plan to export iguana meat in order to reduce numbers of these destructive reptiles while also generating income. Photograph by Rafael L. Joglar.



Puerto Rico's Department of Natural Resources will be training volunteers to round up the iguanas, then exporting the meat at prices up to \$6 a pound. Demand for iguana meat is high in U.S. states with large populations of Latino and Asian immigrants, said Daniel Galan Kercado, Secretary of the Department of Natural Resources, who anticipated having the plan finalized by May. It would then have to be reviewed by several governmental agencies before it is approved.

This is not a profit-motivated plan — the iguanas are really destructive, as invasive species are wont to be. Given that Puerto Rico spends \$80,000 a year killing iguanas *just at the airport* (reptile-coated runways have forced several planes to abort landings), it seems only fair that the iguanas should start bringing in some cash.

Introduced Green Iguanas (*Iguana iguana*) have become a scourge in Puerto Rico. The international airport in San Juan alone spends \$80,000 per year in efforts to reduce the density of the population around the airport, where lizards basking on the runway have interrupted air traffic. Photograph by Rafael L. Joglar.