

Executive Summary - West Indian Iguanas: Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan

The West Indian iguanas form a unique group of species inhabiting tropical dry forests throughout the Bahamas and the Greater and Lesser Antilles. They are among the most endangered of the world's lizards, primarily because much of their fragile island habitat has been eliminated by human development or severely degraded by exotic species (Case et al. 1992; Taboda 1992). Mongooses, dogs, and feral cats prey heavily on juvenile iguanas, and in many areas introduced livestock have denuded the native vegetation on which iguanas depend (Iverson 1978; Carey 1966, 1975). The Jamaican iguana, considered by some to be the rarest lizard in the world, may number no more than 100 adults, and several other subspecies of West Indian iguana have declined to below 1,500 individuals (Blair 1991a; Alberts 1993). Until recently, these lizards were the largest land animals in the West Indies and a dominant ecological force. Because they are likely to be important seed dispersers for many endemic plants (Iverson, 1985), the loss of West Indian iguanas has serious consequences for the ecosystems in which they live.

The purpose of this Action Plan is to summarize the current status of wild populations of all West Indian iguanas, including the rock iguanas, (genus *Cyclura*) as well as the Lesser Antillean iguana (*Iguana delicatissima*). Each taxon has been ranked as Critically Endangered, Endangered, or Vulnerable according to IUCN Red List criteria (Mace and Lande 1991; Mace et al. 1992; IUCN 1994). The primary threats impacting each taxon are identified, and specific actions for mitigating those threats are recommended. On the basis of this information, the Action Plan prioritizes the conservation projects most urgently needed to help ensure the survival of each taxon.

The Action Plan is organized into six major sections. Introductory essays on the systematic relationships of West Indian iguanas to other iguanid lizards, the biogeography of the West Indies, socioeconomic history and current issues, the ecology of dry tropical forest ecosystems, and West Indian iguana habitat, are presented in order to provide a broad context for the material that follows. Next, the status of each taxon is reviewed including current population estimates and a ranking of relative endangerment. This is followed by an overview of major threats and existing conservation measures. Individual species/subspecies accounts follow, providing more detailed information on distribution, status of wild populations, ecology and natural history, condition of critical habitat, threats to survival, current conservation programs, critical regional conservation initiatives, and specific priority conservation projects. Recommendations for reintroduction, translocation to unoccupied habitat, population monitoring, control of introduced species, genetic research, captive management, and education follow. Finally, a list of national agencies, research institutions, and conservation organizations in the countries of origin for the taxa covered by the Action Plan is included.

The West Indian Iguana Action Plan was drafted by 27 contributors from nine different countries, with the common goal of designing viable conservation strategies for the iguanas we have come to care deeply about but only begun to understand. It is our collective hope that the plan will not only inspire those in the scientific community to further study the intriguing biology of these magnificent lizards, but also serve as a strong impetus to government officials, conservation planners, and community leaders to implement immediate and effective conservation measures on their behalf. Iguanas

represent a unique and irreplaceable component of West Indian natural heritage that must be preserved for future generations. To the extent that this Action Plan can help foster an increased sense of pride and stewardship for iguanas in the people with who they share the islands, we will have begun to achieve our mission.