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FACT-SHEET ON:

**Endemic iguanas: Grand Cayman Blue Iguana *Cyclura lewisi*
and Sister Islands Rock Iguana *Cyclura nubila caymanensis*
UK Overseas Territory: Cayman Islands**

The Grand Cayman Blue Iguana is endemic to the island of Grand Cayman, and is only found currently in the districts of North Side and East End. Formerly believed (from fossil evidence) to have occurred in suitable habitats throughout Grand Cayman, by 2002 this iguana's distribution had contracted to a 4 km² area of occurrence in the east interior. This is



Grand Cayman's largest native land animal: a dragon-like lizard, blue once it warms up each morning, and growing to over 1.5m long and over 11 kg weight, and can live as long as humans.

Originally found throughout Grand Cayman's coastal areas and interior dry shrublands, this magnificent reptile was driven to the brink of extinction, with only 5 to 15 individuals surviving from the original wild population, by 2003. The main causes of this catastrophic decline range through habitat destruction and road-kills, to the deaths caused by free-roaming dogs, and feral cats. Although these human-caused pressures led to the Grand Cayman Blue Iguana being the most endangered iguana on earth, this is one species that can be saved. The Blue Iguana Recovery Programme (BIRP) uses a captive breeding and head-starting facility, acquisition and management of protected areas, and public education. After many years of work, this long-term approach is making remarkable strides to give great hope for the future of the Blue Iguana, and its threatened tropical dry forest habitat, and the other species which depend on this. Fred Burton, director of the Blue Iguana Recovery Programme (a programme of the National Trust for the Cayman Islands with local and international partners, including UKOTCF) commented that the programme succeeded due to their low-tech methods: rough-hewn wooden breeding pens were built with tight passageways where the young iguanas could take shelter from predators. The pens were built in 2001 and every infant born that year survived. The recovery programme also maintains wire cages for slightly older iguanas. They are released into protected reserves at about two years old, when they are big enough to defend themselves against cats and other predators. All of the iguanas born in the programme are implanted with microchips to help identify them. Since then, repatriation of over 1000 captive-reared and head-started juveniles to protected areas has expanded its extent of occurrence to 15.6 km² in three subpopulations located in the QE II Botanic Park, the Salina Reserve, and the Colliers Wilderness Reserve. The area of occupancy within these areas is 0.5 km².

Above: Grand Cayman Blue Iguana, © Simon Vacher.
Below: Sister Islands Rock Iguana, © National Trust for the Cayman Islands.



Significant breeding populations no longer occurred outside these protected areas.

As a direct result of conservation action, plus natural reproduction in protected areas, the population of Grand Cayman Blue Iguana is increasing. In late 2012, BIRP estimated that the wild population had risen to approximately 750 individuals, and the IUCN subsequently reclassified the species from Critically Endangered to Endangered. However, the small extent of occurrence reflects the fact that the species is now effectively restricted to managed protected areas. The surrounding and intervening land, once also occupied by iguanas, is inexorably declining in quality as roads, housing, and other human infrastructure expands bringing associated invasive alien predators (dogs, cats, and rats). The loss of recolonization options may eventually impact the population. Future population growth is not likely to be possible beyond a total of approximately 1,000 adults, unless additional protected habitat is secured.

The Sister Islands Rock Iguana is found only on Cayman Brac

and Little Cayman. It is critically endangered, with an estimated population reduced to between 2,000 and 4,000 by 2019, due to human actions. This subspecies of the Cuban Iguana is capable of growing to more than 9 kg in weight. It varies in colour from almost black to grey or brown, with local highlights in orange, cream and sometimes a little blue, but never blue on the spines or all over the body like the Grand Cayman species.

Once abundant on both islands, this Iguana has been almost wiped out on Cayman Brac, suffering extreme losses to free-roaming dogs and feral cats, alien species introduced by humans. Now only a small population breeds at one location on Cayman Brac's southern coast platform, while adults are often sighted near the West End Public Park; these adults were translocated from Little Cayman, a practice which is now illegal. On Little Cayman, fewer than 2,000 Sister Islands Rock Iguanas remain. They generally congregate around the built-up areas in and around Blossom Village.

A project led by the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, in partnership with the Cayman Islands Department of Environment and Blue Iguana Conservation, has assessed the risks facing the Sister Islands Rock Iguana. It found that the pressures that led to the near-extinction of the Grand Cayman Blue Iguana – development, wild animals, vehicular traffic and human population – are now present on Little Cayman as well. Feral cats are a common threat, eating the young iguanas before they mature; domestic dogs are also being allowed to run free,

which threatens the breeding adults. Road-kills are disturbingly frequent now, and the first large-scale habitat destruction is becoming evident as residential subdivisions start to creep across the landscape. Feeding by humans compounds the problem, as the iguanas are drawn out of the wilderness and into the highest threat areas.

The information gathered during the research project provided much-needed insight and confirmed the need for active conservation of the species in order to prevent a population crash like that of the Blue Iguana and, therefore, avoid the need for another major recovery effort. In 2011, the National Trust for the Cayman Islands – along with the the Cayman Islands Department of Environment, the International Reptile Conservation Foundation, Inc., and local stakeholders – launched a species management plan for the Sister Islands Rock Iguana. This details the strategy necessary to increase the population, as well as the deadlines and parties responsible for various action items.

Like the Grand Cayman Blue Iguana, the Sister Isles Rock Iguana is strictly protected under local and international legislation and should never be handled except for authorised conservation work. It is illegal to capture or move these endemic iguanas from any of the three Cayman Islands and it is important to keep the Blue and Sister Islands iguana populations separate on their own respective islands, as they naturally should be.