

SCIENCE

Jamaican Rock Iguanas Get a Shot at a New Home in the Wild

Trilobites

By JOANNA KLEIN OCT. 10, 2016

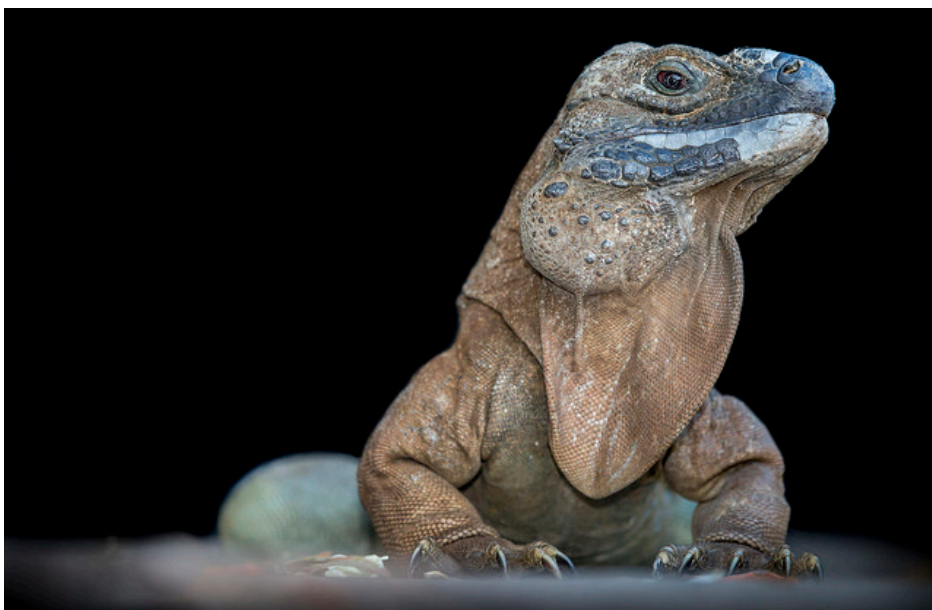


Photo by Robin Moore

Meet the Jamaican rock iguana. Its scaly body stretches around two feet long, tail not included. Slate blue spikes stick up along its spine, and a saggy sac of loose skin wraps around its head like a hoodless cowl. When cornered, it strikes with its front claws — one reportedly ripped an eye from a dog.

Once common in Jamaica, this iguana is now among the most endangered species in the world. And without the hard work of many conservationists, it would probably be extinct. Now those conservationists are hopeful that a decision that appears to have been made about the construction of a seaport in Jamaica could make restoring this lizard to the wild a little easier.

Despite its armored appearance and tenacious lizard traits, the Jamaican iguana has barely survived a variety of threats: hunters, predators like mongooses (but also feral dogs, cats and pigs) and more recently habitat destruction for charcoal production. In fact, it was thought to be extinct until 1990, when a hog hunter's dog sniffed out a living, breathing animal in the forests of Hellshire Hills in Jamaica.

Since then, the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Iguana Specialist Group, an international team of universities, conservationists and zoos, and others like the Jamaica Iguana Recovery Group, have jumped in to protect the iguanas, which are now amid a comeback. In the wild, the groups help sustain 300

breeding pairs living within a remote, six-square-mile area of the Hellshire Hills. But maintaining nearly every aspect of the lizards' lives was never the intention of their helpers. The original plan was to return the iguanas to a habitat where they once thrived, the Goat Islands, a mile off Jamaica's mainland. There, they could live threat-free and relatively unhelped by humans.



Photo by Robin Moore

For the past two years, however, this future home was threatened by government plans to build an international seaport smack dab on top of it. The Goat Islands and Hellshire Hills are part of the Portland Bight Protected Area, which was established in 1999 and contains mangroves, unique forests, limestone outcroppings, coral reefs and fish sanctuaries. But the government in 2014 started to entertain a deal with China Harbour Engineering Company to build a huge seaport in the area, and so began a small war to save the islands.

Today, there are still no Jamaican iguanas on the Goat Islands. But after an announcement made on Twitter in late September by Jamaica's prime minister, Andrew Holness, it appears that there will be no seaport there, either.

#TownHall Re question about Goat Islands. ANS: We have already taken a decision that there are other locations that would do less environmental damage. We are going ahead with a logistics port but not at Goat Island. The entry into an official document may not have represented the decision of the government.

**Andrew Holness**

@AndrewHolnessJM

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Conservationists welcomed this announcement, although Jamaican officials have yet to confirm that the prime minister's remarks on social media represent official policy, citing a governmental focus on the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew.

But keeping the seaport out of the islands isn't enough for the people involved in the effort to restore the iguanas.