

CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES  
OF WILD FAUNA AND FLORA



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REPORT ON THE SMUGGLING OF BAHAMIAN ROCK IGUANAS

This document has been submitted by CITES Management Authority of Bahamas in relation to agenda item 27 on *Enforcement matters*.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2014, thirteen (13) Appendix-I Bahamian Rock Iguanas (*Cyclura rileyi* sp.) were discovered by officers of the United Kingdom Border force in an attempt to smuggle them into the European pet market. The iguanas were stuffed into socks in the suitcases of two (2) Romanian women, aged 24 and 26. These couriers were arriving from The Bahamas and in transit to Dusseldorf, Germany. Twelve of the iguanas survived the trip one, however, one unfortunately, died. The iguanas were seized by the authorities and the women arrested. They have since pled guilty to the charges associated with the illegal importation and were each sentenced to twelve (12) months in jail in the United Kingdom.

Following publication of the news of the event in the UK media, the Bahamian High Commission in London, England, contacted the UK Border Forces which advised that they had the iguanas. The Bahamian High Commission (HC) contacted the Bahamian CITES Management Authority (MA) in The Bahamas which, in turn, contacted the UK Authorities who verified that the smuggling incident had occurred and that they had arrested the two (2) women. The UK Authorities advised that the iguanas were being held at a proper facility and wanted to know if The Bahamas wanted the iguanas returned (as per CITES Article VIII, paragraph 4). The UK authorities advised that the iguanas were examined by veterinarians, and while they were dehydrated following their flight, they were otherwise in excellent condition.

Following confirmation by the Bahamian Management Authority that the Bahamas did want the twelve (12) living iguanas repatriated, the UK authorities generously offered to pay for the repatriation exercise including sending handlers along on the flight to The Bahamas to ensure proper care of the animals.

At this time, the UK management Authority has issued CITES export permits for the twelve iguanas and the Bahamian MA has issued corresponding CITES and health import permits for the twelve (12) living iguanas. The UK MA has advised the Bahamas MA of the date of the repatriation of the iguanas and arrangements are being made to receive and the animals.

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\* The geographical designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the CITES Secretariat or the United Nations Environment Programme concerning the legal status of any country, territory, or area, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. The responsibility for the contents of the document rests exclusively with its author.

The iguanas were originally thought to have been poached from the island of San Salvador which is one of the islands in the Bahamian archipelago with a wild population of rock iguanas. However, information from the two women indicates that the iguanas actually originated from a population in the Exuma Islands chain. Examination of photographs by experts supports this conclusion. Genetic testing may take place to further identify from which particular island or cay the animals originated.

A site visit conducted in April 2014 by researchers reported that only two iguanas came out to be fed at Sandy Cay in Exuma in comparison to April 2013 where 11 iguanas were present. It is likely that the iguanas originated from this cay. The researchers concluded that the iguanas, if returned to the cay, it is likely that they may suffer from aggression if other iguanas have moved into the territory.

Bahamian authorities in the Royal Bahamas Police Force (RBPF) and the Office of the Attorney General have been identified and their names communicated to officers identified by the UK MA. Communication has been established and officers from the RBPF are expected to travel to the UK as a part of their investigations.

Subsequent to this smuggling incident a report was reviewed indicating that in addition to this seizure, two other shipments of unidentified Appendix-I Bahamian *Cyclura sp.* iguanas had recently been smuggled out of The Bahamas undetected at the same time. If these other iguanas were of the same sub-species, and if comparable numbers of specimens were involved, these smuggling incidents may constitute a significant percentage of the entire wild population. The CITES MA authorities of the United States advised The Bahamas MA of an application they had received seeking to import Bahamian iguanas from a commercial reptile dealer in Austria (Jürgen Schmidt, doing business as CYCLURA.INFO), claiming that they had been “captive bred” (the parental stock were reportedly imported from The Bahamas by in a zoo in Dusseldorf, Germany; Aquazoo Löbbecke Museum, which is closed through the spring of 2015). The U.S. authorities requested information on the legality of the founder stock, but based on the information provided, were unable to verify the taxon of the animals or the claim that the animals descended from lawful stock. The Bahamas MA notified the United States that no live *Cyclura spp.* iguanas had ever been exported to anywhere in the European Union at any time for any reason; therefore, the iguanas in question could not be of legal origin, even if hatched in captivity (as stated on the CITES import permit application submitted to the United States). Even if the iguanas in this application were hatched in captivity, The Bahamas considers them to be the ongoing illicit proceeds from the original illegal act of smuggling of the animals from our country.

The Bahamian MA has been aware of illegally obtained Bahamian iguanas in Germany for many years through the internet with some persons actually having photographs on line purporting to be Bahamian Rock Iguanas. The attempt to export Bahamian iguanas using captive breeding certificates allegedly obtained from a zoo in Germany suggests that attempts are now being made to launder illegally obtained specimens or progeny from illegally obtained founder stock as “captive bred” so that they can be legally sold and traded commercially internationally under CITES.

The Bahamas is concerned for the following reasons:

1. Bahamian iguanas are valuable to The Bahamas. They are the largest extant terrestrial vertebrates native to The Bahamas. They are cultural icons almost all of which are recognized by IUCN as Endangered or Critically Endangered. They have been listed in Appendix I since 1981, and in Appendix II from 1977 until they were uplisted following a proposal by the United States to the 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the Conference of the Parties (New Delhi, 1981). They are valuable to the economy as they are used in used in ecotourism programs which benefit economically disadvantaged rural communities. Rock iguanas provide critical ecosystem services through seed

dispersal and the structuring of trophic relationship on the islands, islets, and cays which they inhabit; these services are essential to maintain the health of the ecosystems in these areas. So while poaching of these species is an immediate and critical threat to their survival, such activities also imperil the very landscapes which these animals inhabit. The insular remoteness of the wild populations makes surveillance and enforcement difficult. However, poachers, who are increasingly organized and well equipped, with local connections and long established pathways, have been able to poach live rock iguanas and subsequently smuggle them to buyers in consumer countries;

2. A brief review of Internet offers of sale of rock iguanas from The Bahamas suggests that the primary recipients of these smuggled animals may be in certain countries of the European Union, although additional analysis is needed as attempts to smuggle the animals into the United States have also been uncovered;

3. The seizure of the shipment in the UK shows that poaching of Bahamian rock iguanas is currently taking place;

4. The ease and *modus operandi* with which the smugglers were able to operate implies a familiarity with The Bahamas, our facilities and systems, and indicates that local collaborators are most likely involved. This suggests the involvement of organized criminal syndicates as is seen in many other parts of the world. Furthermore, this is not the first time that the perpetrators have tried this smuggling method. While the poaching and smuggling appear to be sporadic, this activity clearly suggests a long standing and well organized operation;

5. The ease with which the iguanas were collected and exported from The Bahamas demonstrates serious flaws in our enforcement which also may have possible ramifications for our national security;

6. The sale of Bahamian iguanas on the internet, now for many years, supports the theory of long standing nature of the operation and the commercial nature of the captive breeding of illegally acquired founder stock;

7. The willingness of the people in the countries of the EU to pose alongside captive Bahamian Rock iguanas in pictures on the internet possibly identifying their facilities, demonstrates that they feel that they can operate with impunity as there is no applicable law to stop such activities, nor does there appear to be the desire to develop a legal mechanism to counter the commercialization of both smuggled iguanas and their offspring;

8. The laundering of illegal specimens of Bahamian rock iguanas or their progeny will open the door for the illegal import of even more wild collected specimens and make enforcement impractical for isolated populations of these animals on widely scattered islets and cays. Such a threat is not limited to the iguanas of The Bahamas, but for all the species of rock iguana, parrots and other CITES-listed species throughout the Caribbean and around the world;

9. The breeding and subsequent sale of progeny from successfully smuggled animals serves as a financial incentive to poach and smuggle additional specimens;

10. The occasional or sporadic captive breeding of illegally acquired endangered species, such as The Bahamas rock iguanas (and certainly many other species), only increases consumer demand among high-end collectors and commercial dealers and breeders. Such spikes in demand cannot be met solely by breeders, and the only other source of animals to meet the demand are illegally harvested and smuggled wild animals; and

11. The effect of illegal trade on wild populations of Bahamian rock iguanas will be greater than that of the slaughter of the Africa's elephants and rhinoceroses based on their status and the insular nature of their populations. In Africa, for the sake of comparison, the enforcement burden for combatting the illegal take and trade in African elephant ivory and rhinoceros horn generally rests solely on the shoulders of developing countries. These range States usually have inadequate resources for effective enforcement. However, the failure to address the demand of commercial markets has resulted in the increasing and continuing slaughter of elephants and rhinos, regardless of the enforcement effort in the range States; as the value of the animals increase, poaching and illegal trade may accelerate and wild populations may suffer;

12. The failure to address the demand-driven markets in consumer States may result in the decimation of the wild *Cyclura* spp. populations (and certainly other species), which will be accelerated should the smuggling of specimens continue to produce financial gain through sale and breeding, thus, further stimulating commercial demand.

The Bahamas views the smuggling of its endemic species a threat not only to the viability of wild populations of these species but also to the economic, cultural and conservation viability of rural communities. Rural communities may suffer direct economic impacts as their sustainable livelihoods, partly based on revenues from ecotourism, can be negatively impacted; this is particularly troubling for communities which are already struggling through the global economic recession.

In addition to addressing the many enforcement challenges, the demand-driven market in consumer countries must be better addressed. Failure to do so will only exacerbate and further entrench the problem. Enforcement is based on a “donut effect” with regards to the market as currently all efforts are focused on the perimeter in the developing host country on preventing the poaching and the route while no effort is made inside the market country once the iguanas reach their final destination which is usually in a developed consumer country. This “donut effect” places undue stress on the developing country which can ill-afford to allocate already scarce resources in a failing effort while some developed consumer country only shrug their shoulders at an unfortunate situation in a far away country, rarely contributing to support the efforts of the range states by providing financial or technical resources to support national enforcement efforts. Consumer countries drive the illegal trade, provide little support to stop illicit activities at the source, and look to developing countries with inadequate resources to shoulder the entire supply-side burden of enforcement.

If poaching to supply international trade, and the smuggling activities themselves, are to be stopped, both consumer countries, transit countries, and range states must contribute in a meaningful way to the effort. The Bahamas recommends:

Recommendations:

1. Parties should, as appropriate within their national systems, develop national enforcement networks to coordinate the actions of multiple agencies which may have different or overlapping authorities for the implementation and enforcement of CITES, as well as the prosecution of violations of the Convention. As an example, in the case of The Bahamas, enforcement should be improved through the establishment of an enforcement network as a sub-committee of the existing National CITES Committee. This national enforcement network should be chaired by the Royal Bahamas Police Force (RBPF) and include representatives of the Attorney General’s Office, Defense Force, Customs, Ministry of Dept. of Agriculture, Dept. of Marine Resources, The Bahamas National Trust and other agencies and individuals involved in wildlife enforcement. All weaknesses identified in the recent smuggling incident discussed above should be included as a part of a CITES enforcement and implementation capacity building strategy in The Bahamas. This should include improving the permitting system, training for all enforcement and border staff at air and sea ports, public outreach and education, identification and prosecution of persons involved in illegal acts to further international trade, and other areas as appropriate;
2. Parties consider adopting laws and regulations, as appropriate within their national systems, similar to those of some countries, allowing for enforcement actions to be taken, after the fact, against illegally imported specimens and their progeny. Parties should consider making such standards apply retrospectively to CITES-listed specimens obtained following the date when the species was included in the Appendices or from when it was listed or protected in that country. Such legal or regulatory standards should apply to the making of legal acquisition findings under CITES

in that illegal founder stock , or their subsequent progeny, should not receive a positive finding of legal acquisition;

3. Parties should regulate, as appropriate within their national systems, the ownership, possession, sale, and advertising of CITES-listed living specimens of species endemic to the Caribbean to keep illegally acquired specimens, and their progeny, from entering domestic or international trade;

4. If the original CITES export documents for a CITES-listed specimen or its founder stock cannot be verified in the course of making a legal acquisition finding, Parties should, as appropriate and before issuing a CITES export document, contact the country of origin for verification of the legality of the acquisition and export of the specimens or their founder stock (which can essentially serve to launder animals of illegal origin by putting them into permitted trade);

5. The Secretariat, non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations, and developed countries support capacity building and training initiatives in the Caribbean;

6. Non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations and developed countries support the establishment and work program of a regional Caribbean Wildlife Enforcement Network as recommended in other fora, such as the Caribbean Iguana Conservation Workshop: Exploring a Region-Wide Approach to Recovery programs which was held in San Juan, Puerto Rico in December 2013, in which The Bahamas participated;

7. The Secretariat, non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations, and developed countries support the establishment of an e-permitting system for the islands of the Caribbean in order to improve the security of the CITES permitting system, national reporting, and enforcement; and

8. The consideration for the granting of funding opportunities be expanded to include priority for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) especially for those whose wildlife are under threat to disappear due to sea level rise as a result of global warming.

The survival of wildlife on Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and in many developing countries depends on the integrity of their natural ecosystems and the support of local communities. Such natural ecosystems are threatened by many factors including global warming, development, disease, habitat fragmentation, alien invasive species and illegal or otherwise unsustainable trade. CITES has been an invaluable tool in the management of sustainable trade and in the control of illegal trade. In light of their demand for CITES listed wildlife, consumer countries now need to enhance the support which they already provide to build the capacity of range states in the developing world to better implement and enforce the convention. Consumer countries should also address their own markets to ensure that possession and trade in illegally acquired specimens, and their progeny, is prohibited under national law. The decimation of wild populations of Africa's elephant and rhinoceroses is testament to the failure to achieve this standard. If the CITES community is to successfully meet this challenge, it must adapt, build capacity in the developing world, and address the market for smuggled animals and their progeny.

Figure 1



Seized Bahamian rock Iguana in sock Source: UK Border Force

Figure 2



, Seized Bahamian rock iguana. Source: UK Border Force

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