

Scientist warns of biodiversity crisis

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Karen Varnham tells local environment enthusiasts of problems in their environment.

Like the rest of the world, the Cayman Islands is facing a biodiversity crisis, a United Kingdom (UK) scientist told local environment enthusiasts last week. Dr Colin Clubbe, the Head of Conservation and Higher Education at the Royal Botanic Gardens, said extinction of species has been occurring at an alarming rate.

"We're in the middle of a biodiversity crisis. We're seeing an extraordinary acceleration in species lost," he said. Dr Clubbe was one of two scientists facilitating an education seminar as part of the Darwin Initiative Project at the Brassiere Conference Room in George Town. The UK Government grant scheme, which began here last year, is aimed at promoting diversity protection and sustainable use of natural resources.

He said that scientists have developed several mathematical models but it still is difficult to measure the real impact on the environment. However, the Kew Garden chief disclosed that the rates could be in the thousands and are caused by humans. "We're facing rates of extinction between a hundred and a thousand times, the maximum that's been recorded in the geological past, and most of those have been driving by human activities," he said.

He noted that humans were knowledgeable of the biodiversity issues and the importance of the environment. "The big paradox is that on the other side we also recognise how important biodiversity is in terms of the ecological services it provides us with, and the direct uses," he said. Dr Clubbe also related some of his work experience on similar projects in the British Virgin Islands, Montserrat and Turks and Caicos Islands.

Also returning to the UK with Dr Clubbe after a two-week assignment on the Darwin Project was Karen Varnham – an independent biologist. Ms Varnham said the biodiversity problems in Cayman are common to many regional countries. "The problems here are very typical of a lot of other Caribbean countries. It's a big problem everywhere in the world at the moment."

But she said the Caymanian people had an advantage in that they were both aware and interested in finding a solution. "What has impressed us here is people's awareness of the problems and they're interested in doing something about them and that enthusiasm has been very impressive," she said. Ms Varnham was here to assist in developing strategies for dealing with invasive species as part of Cayman biodiversity.

"After seeing the Blue Iguana head-starting facility at Botanic Gardens, that's been a really interesting conservation highlight," she said following an assessment of the national park. "The story behind saving the Blue Iguana is absolutely amazing and is inspirational in the Caribbean.

The Green Iguanas are a threat for the future and I think we really need some research on ways they could impact the Blue Iguanas. I think that's the thing that's most important." She also expressed concerns about stray cats, dogs and chickens, calling them a nuisance around people's houses.

According to her, they are an environmental health issue that could cause big ecological problems. Strong partnerships were forged between the scientists and the local experts, she said. Both scientists visited problem sites and held discussions with the Department of Agriculture, Department of Environment, Humane Society and other interest groups.

Meanwhile, Ms Varnham left here with wonderful memories of sites in Cayman Brac, which she described as fantastic. "The best day I have had is when we went to Cayman Brac and that was fantastic. We absolutely loved it over there. It was very exciting, it was the high point for me," she said.