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COMMENTARY

A bit of good news

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by the Green Hornet

Every so often, a heartwarming story comes across the Internet, and I thought I would share one with my readers this week. At a time when the extinction levels of many plants and animals are reaching all-time records, scientists and conservationists around the world are desperately trying to save species that are literally on their last legs.

Our own Blue Iguana Recovery Programme, sponsored by the National Trust, has hit the international media headlines in the past year, and a visit to the breeding project at the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park is a must for any visitor to Cayman. Now that the iguanas have expanded into the Park's territory, the search is on for other undeveloped parts of Grand Cayman that they can repopulate – hopefully, avoiding humans and feral dogs and cats at the same time.

This winter 25 of the "Blues" have been moved into the Trust's Salinas Reserve in Eastern Cayman, where special habitats have been placed, and from all reports, the females have taken up residence just where they were supposed to. The next big "if" is whether these amazing reptiles can begin breeding in the wild.

The head honcho on the Blue Iguana Recovery Programme is Fred Burton; you can e-mail him and he'll put you on the list to receive his Blue Iguana Tales newsletter. Just send a message to: fjburton@blueiguana.ky or check out their Web site at <http://www.blueiguana.ky/>.

Of course, another big question is whether there are enough wild places left that the Blues can re-inhabit. A flight across the big island shows everything west of George Town to be pretty much concreted over – or at least due for it.

There are a few large patches of green, with the Barkers area in West Bay being the largest contiguous piece. The urban cancer is spreading ever-eastward with little or nothing to stop it. The time is very much ripe for a move by government to protect as much of the remaining habitat as possible.

A recent editorial in the Net News talked about "balancing" development and the environment. When I was at school and we were weighing things on the balance, if you had a very large weight on one side of the scales, you had to put an equally large weight on the other side to balance the scales. So... we've already had a huge urban weight on one side – now let's have a similarly huge environmental weight on the other to bring about balance.

For almost five years, the Department of Environment (DOE) has had on the books a piece of comprehensive environmental legislation that will put into place a series of laws that will help protect what is left of Cayman. Despite stirring speeches to the contrary, no politician has yet had the wherewithal (guts) to introduce the legislation.

According to a recent Net News interview with Ms. Gina Ebanks-Petrie, director of the DOE, the idea would be first to hold a series of public meetings at which the legislation would be presented for comment. In my opinion, this would just give the politicians a chance to further stall any proactive decisions.

As the last Development Plan showed us, it takes only one person to rip up years of careful review and public consultation, thus making the process meaningless.

We know from that plan where the environmentally sensitive areas are, and we know what we have to do to protect them. So, let's stop dithering and put some protection in place.

Word has it that the scientists visiting Cayman under the Darwin Initiative's Biodiversity Project were appalled at the environmental degradation on Grand Cayman – something that is certainly going to affect the long-term ecological balance on the island.

They were reported to be overjoyed during a visit to the Sister Islands that biodiversity was relatively intact there. However, if there isn't some kind of effective, planned protection on the Brac and Little Cayman, all the good will in the world won't stop them from becoming like Big Sister!

For example, the rock iguana found on the Brac is the same species as the iguana found on Little Cayman. Currently, there doesn't seem to be a problem with their populations, but we don't even know how many there are, so it's impossible to say whether they are declining in numbers, except from anecdotal reports.

So, what was that piece of good news? Oh, yes.

Well, the Bermuda Sun reports that a rare bird has become less rare, with the hatching of 36 Cahow chicks – Bermuda's national bird – on Nonsuch Island. The future for this bird, says the Sun, has never been brighter. "The bird, which has become a powerful symbol of hope, was thought extinct for over 500 years, but its rediscovery in 1951 sparked a long-running conservation project to restore the species. Jeremy Madeiros, government conservation officer, said there were now 75 nesting pairs at the island – more than ever before.

"It's very satisfying," he said. "This is a species that is still on the knife-edge of extinction. It is encouraging to see how many chicks have hatched because they are the future of the entire species. It is sobering to realize that we have the fate of this species in our hands."

The Cahow, the only seabird that is unique to Bermuda, spends almost its entire life at sea, returning to the island to hatch a single egg each year. "You could say that they are like Bermudians in that they are very attached to their piece of the rock. They are a hardy species and they continue to surprise a lot of people who have written them off in the past. Their future has never been better in 400 years," said Mr. Madeiros.

Meanwhile, in Brazil, a bird that once populated that country can now only be found in captivity. The Spix's Macaw, the world's rarest parrot species, is native to Brazil but has been extinct in the wild since October 2000. It can only be saved by means of a captive breeding programme. This Easter, reports the Tenerife News, a little Spix's Macaw hatched, becoming the twelfth of its species in the Brazilian government's official breeding programme.

The only breeding pair is kept in the Loro Parque Fundación, Tenerife, and this chick represents the pair's third success, following two that hatched in 2004. The chances for survival of this nestling are good, reports the News, and the Loro Parque Fundación is optimistic that another Spix's Macaw

will grow to be an adult and contribute to the conservation of its species.

Currently, there are about another 80 living Spix's Macaws in captivity. It is hoped that these can be incorporated into the international breeding programme. The aim of this project is to manage the population of Spix's Macaws in captivity so as to conserve the species and reintroduce it to its original habitat – just as we are trying to do with the Blue Iguana.

As we struggle, through expensive and risky scientific intervention, to protect the rare animals and plants with whom we share this planet, we must also struggle with the difficulties of protecting the environment for those species that are not yet at risk. And that means making some tough decisions. For one, it means saying "no" to future development in many places in Cayman; for another, it means giving land to the National Trust to ensure its protection in perpetuity.