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## The search for Invasive Alien Species

Written By: [Toni Nicholas](#) on Oct 18th, 2010



Participants are schooled about Maria Island.

It is a typical scenario. A man made problem, turning into a major catastrophe or having the potential to become one. In the end, a few dedicated environmentalists are left to lead efforts at picking up pieces and healing the wounds, so that the effects are minimized on the rest of us earthlings. The case of the invasive alien species of iguanas brought into Saint Lucia about ten years ago is one such scenario. The threat; that they have the potential to cross breed with our native iguana and potentially decimate the species, having escaped into the wild.

It was one of the issues discussed here this week, during an international meeting which dealt with "mitigating the threats of Invasive Alien Species in the Insular Caribbean." Held at the Bay Gardens Hotel, it drew over thirty participants from Saint Lucia and four other islands and a facilitator from the UN.

According to Dr Ulrike Krauss, who is Saint Lucia's Invasive Alien Species Coordinator, the meetings this week were for five pilot countries, who first met in Jamaica last year. These countries are Jamaica, Bahamas, Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago and Saint Lucia.



Alwyn Donnelly of the Forestry department.

“What we are engaged in here this year is a review of the progress done in the first year of the project and to discuss the lessons learnt, our challenges and how to overcome them,” Krauss told the STAR. When asked, “What were the major challenges?” she said that the concept of alien species is very difficult in an insular Caribbean. “Our livelihood depends on the pathways of the four T’s— tourism, travel, trade and transport—and that creates a high risk of alien species being brought in along these pathways. Then you have the shortage of human resources and infrastructure to control everything that could be accidentally or deliberately brought into the country.”

In the case of the invasive alien species of Iguanas, they were brought here and housed at the Still Restaurant in Soufriere. As far as investigations revealed, no permits were ever issued for these animals, purchased in a store in Canada. Several years ago it was reported that a pair of the iguanas (out of a possible six) had escaped, but some believe that the iguanas had been breeding and some hatchlings may have escaped before that. As soon as the problem was identified, two remaining iguanas were later confiscated. However those that had escaped had started living and breeding in the wildlife area in Soufriere and since January, the department of Forestry, have caught and euthanized more than one hundred.

The progress of the efforts to eliminate the alien species Krauss says has been good. "There is still a good window of opportunity since the foreign iguanas seem to be only in the general area of Soufriere while the Saint Lucian Iguana is native to the north east region of the island. So far it would seem that the two populations have not met. But if they do, they may start inter-breeding and we will lose the uniqueness of our Saint Lucian Iguana," Krauss pointed out.

It is the hope that out of this week's meetings that ideas are shared and a greater appreciation and awareness for what we have on the island can be developed. To make this more practical the participants went on a tour of the island Wednesday where they were exposed to some invasive species of plants, including some foreign grass, which was reportedly brought to the island by heavy equipment working on the Le Paradise Hotel Project. This reporter also had the opportunity to tour the Praslin island with the group, a relocation site project for the Saint Lucian lizards. So far the lizards have been multiplying at Praslin Island, free from predators and the harmful effects of humans. Observation stops were also done at Pointe Sables in Vieux Fort and Toraille Waterfalls in Fond St Jacques Soufriere. There, a number of the foreign iguanas have made home using the terrain as cover from their human captors. The crew also stopped off at the Still where the empty tanks which once housed the iguanas laid in a state of disarray.

Whilst Saint Lucia's problem at the moment is the iguana, other members of the group shared their stories, particularly the participants from the Bahamas. There the dreaded Lion Fish which have invaded their waters is said to be killing of a number of marine species and there is the potential for it to make its way further south. The issue of "frosty pod pathogen" which can spread and destroy cocoa plantations was also raised.

Alwyn Donnelly of the Forestry department says it is important for persons to become more aware of invasive alien species and the effects they can have on local plant and animal life as well as important sectors like Agriculture and Fishing. "Our public awareness programs must be ongoing. The fact is that the whole idea of invasive species is something people have to understand, what it means to our livelihood and that there are elements of our environment that are being compromised. These foreign species compete for resources with native species for survival," he told us. And whilst there are laws and policies to regulate the importation of foreign species there is always the tendency of humans to break them. The wildlife protection act calls for permits to allow entry of foreign species and there is an EC\$5,000 fine if this is not adhered to.

Mathew Morton of Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust has been working in collaboration with the Forestry department here for a number of years on such projects as the parrot recovery project and that of the Saint Lucian lizard. "We have a focus on endemic species, species that are unique to those islands and in 2006 when persons started seeing those iguana hatchlings in the Fond St Jacques area we became concerned," he told the Star. Morton spearhead efforts with overseas volunteers and local community based volunteers to capture the foreign iguanas. He

describes their efforts as “encouraging” adding “at the same time we are dealing with a needle in a haystack situation due to the dense vegetation and difficult terrain.” In January the team intends on introducing new methods to help catch the iguanas.

The Forestry department and its partners however, are stepping up efforts at educating and sensitizing the populace on the issues of invasive species and more specifically the foreign iguanas, particularly through schools and the media. They have warned that these Iguanas should not be caught and kept as pets, and anyone spotting them should call the department.

The participants of the workshop ended their meetings on Friday and have promised to continue collaborating on ideas which would lead to the prevention of Invasive Alien Species from entering, invading and affecting our islands.