

Finding our fantastic beasts

Conservationists on British overseas territories are saving some of Earth's most spectacular species. *Stanley Johnson* visits the Cayman Islands — and its newly booming population of blue iguanas

BRITS ABROAD

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The number of British overseas territories, including the Cayman Islands

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In 2002, there were only about 10 blue iguanas left on the Cayman Islands, a British overseas territory in the western Caribbean. Today, the species has been brought back from the brink of extinction — the islands are the only place in the world where blue iguanas still exist in the wild. As a long-standing environmentalist, I count myself lucky to have had the chance to meet some of the people involved in this extraordinary story.

A few hours after I landed in George Town, the capital of the Cayman Islands, Stuart Miller, of the Cayman National Trust, drove me out to Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park. There, I met Karen Ford and Nick Ebanks, who run the Blue Iguana Recovery Program. "This is the heart of the operation," Karen explained as she

showed us round. "When we started back in 2004, the blue iguana population in Grand Cayman [the largest of the islands] was functionally extinct. Since then, we have bred and released more than 900 here on Grand Cayman. We believe that there are more than 1,000 blue iguanas out there today. That means some of the iguanas are breeding in the wild and some of the hatchlings are surviving."

As they are prepared for release, the iguanas are kept in large, open pens. Nick opened the gate of one of the pens and scooped up a large male in his arm. He placed it on the wall and stroked the spiky crest on its back.

"Do you think I could hold it?" I asked.

Looking back, I am not sure that

in strict health-and-safety terms it was a good idea. The magnificent animal, 5ft long from snout to tail, had fearsome teeth and fearsome jaws. Would those jaws be easy to prise open, once they were clamped on solid flesh? Were iguana bites infectious? But Nick didn't seem perturbed.

"Run your finger up and down Billy's spine. He'll like that."

Later that afternoon, Stuart and I met Fred Burton, the man who perhaps more than anyone else has been responsible for preventing the Grand Cayman blue iguana from going the way of the dodo.

Fred first came to Cayman in 1979, having just taken a degree in natural sciences at Cambridge.

"I bumped into a blue iguana" he told us. "You don't expect to bump into a giant blue reptile with red eyes. It changed my life."

The success of the iguana project comes in large part from a network of supporters around the world who have helped build up a genetically viable stock of breeding animals (you need at least 20) and a scrupulously supervised breeding programme.

"There's a lady at San Diego Zoo called Tandora Grant," said Burton. "She knows exactly which male is to mate with which female. We follow her instructions to the letter."

"The fight to save the blue iguana from extinction may have been won," Burton continued, "but that doesn't mean the battle is over. We have to deal with feral dogs, with disease, with the pressures of development. The iguanas want to go to the beaches to lay their eggs, but instead they're being driven inland. And now there's the threat from the green iguana too, which has somehow arrived here. Soon, there may be a million green iguanas pushing eastward across the island, competing for habitat. They may even be able to interbreed with the blue iguana, to produce some blue-green hybrid. That would be disastrous. The challenge is immense. We need as much support now as we ever did."

At a political level, in the Cayman Islands at least, I am

convinced the message — that the blue iguana programme still needs support — is being heard loud and clear.

Over the years I have been able to visit many of Britain's overseas territories. I can't help think that, post-Brexit, we will increasingly see them not as expensive and complicated historical appendages but as a source of immense pride and, in our changed circumstances, as a vital hinterland.

The Cayman Islands are a case in point. Grand Cayman, at least as far as the western end is concerned, is already being heavily developed, but that is not true of the eastern parts of the island. Taking the Mastic Trail, for example, a hiking path that runs through the middle of the island, gives one a chance to see old-growth forest dating from the

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time Christopher Columbus first set eyes on the Caymans.

Another example would be the red-footed booby colony on Little Cayman, which has some 10,000 birds.

Or take the marine environment. For the past 10 years, I have been an ambassador for the United Nations Environment Programme's Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). The CMS aims, inter alia, to protect all marine turtles. There are seven species and the Cayman Islands are home to three of them: the green, the loggerhead and the hawksbill. By the early 20th century, the Cayman turtle nesting population was nearly extinct, but thanks to conservation efforts, turtle numbers are increasing each year.

With the Cayman Islands being considered an integral part of the UK, when the protection of marine turtles comes up for discussion at the CMS, and in other forums, the UK — thanks to the dedicated work of Cayman Island conservationists — has a lot to contribute ■

Stanley Johnson is an environmental campaigner, author and former MEP. His latest novel, Kompromat, is out now (Point Blank £14.99)



BLUE IN THE FACE
Stanley Johnson with Billy, one of more than 1,000 blue iguanas alive today on the Cayman Islands



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