



Media Release

For immediate release

## Captivating Caribbean island to be given a new lease of life

***Starving goats and predatory rats to be removed from Redonda to restore this Caribbean island to its former glory.***

The Government of Antigua and Barbuda has announced plans to remove goats and invasive rats from its most rugged and remote offshore island to allow endangered wildlife and their habitats to recover. “I am immensely proud that my ministry has been a driving force in the development of this major initiative,” says Honourable Molwyn Joseph, Minister of Health and the Environment. “Restoring Redonda to its full glory will be a great achievement for our country.”

Redonda is home to a unique array of plants and animals, including rare lizards found nowhere else in the world<sup>1</sup>. The uninhabited and seldom visited island is also formally recognised as an Important Bird Area<sup>2</sup>, supporting globally-significant numbers of seabirds.

However, the island’s plant and animal populations are disappearing fast thanks in large part to its population of over 5,000 aggressive black rats (an invasive alien species) which prey heavily on the island’s wildlife<sup>3</sup>. Together with the herd of long-horned goats that was brought to Redonda by humans more than a century ago, these mammals have transformed this once-forested island into a moonscape. So few plants survive that even the goats now face starvation.

Redonda is over 50 hectares in area and rises dramatically from the Caribbean Sea, 56 km south-west of Antigua. Goat skeletons litter the island, along with the relics of stone buildings from a guano mining community that lived here until the First World War<sup>4</sup>. With few trees left to stabilise the ground, soil and rocks continue to crumble into the sea, threatening nearshore coral reef in the waters below.

“We cannot stand by and watch as a part of our country, part of our history, disappears. We cannot be responsible for decimating animal populations on a regional scale,” says local conservationist Natalya Lawrence of the Environmental Awareness Group (EAG).

The Redonda Restoration Programme has been formed by the Antigua & Barbuda Government and EAG in collaboration with partners from the UK (Fauna & Flora International, British Mountaineering Council), USA (Island Conservation) and New Zealand (Wildlife Management International Ltd).

One of the first steps will be to capture and move the remaining goats to Antigua, where they will be cared for by the Department of Agriculture.

“The goats are starving to death on Redonda and must be removed for their own sake,” explains Astley Joseph, Deputy Director of the Department of Agriculture. “We believe it is important to rescue this rare breed because it could have useful drought-adapted genes that would benefit other herds on Antigua and elsewhere.”

Rats will then be eradicated using a rodenticide bait that has previously been used to restore more than 20 other Caribbean islands without harming native wildlife. This is scheduled to be completed by mid-2017.

“We and other international organisations have offered our support because we recognise that this is a very challenging yet globally important initiative” says Sophia Steele, Eastern Caribbean Project Coordinator at Fauna & Flora International. “Recent studies have identified Redonda as the most important island to restore in the Eastern Caribbean due to its Critically Endangered wildlife and the high probability of lasting success.”

The new programme is funded by the UK Government’s Darwin Initiative, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Taurus Foundation and private sponsors. Additional technical and in-kind support is being provided by Caribbean Helicopters and Syngenta Crop Protection AG.

Dr Helena Jeffery Brown of the Department of the Environment says, “Antiguans and Barbudans will be proud as Redonda becomes a role model for regional biodiversity conservation. This will be yet another example of how this country is proactive in meeting the national and international commitments it has made to conserve biodiversity.”

Antigua and Barbuda has a wealth of experience and success under the ongoing Offshore Islands Conservation Programme which has, since 1995, removed rats and other invasive pests from 15 islets closer to Antigua in the North East Marine Management Area. This has saved the Antiguan racer – once the world’s rarest known snake – from extinction, and enabled an incredible recovery of other native animals and plants<sup>5</sup>. Many tens of thousands of residents and tourists now visit and enjoy Antigua’s pest-free islands every year.

“I am most excited to see the progression of recovery on Redonda once the threat of invasive species is removed,” says local biologist Andrea Otto, who will be part of the research team documenting the recovery process. “I want to see which types of vegetation

spring up first and which birds return. From what we have seen on the smaller islands we have restored, the transformation will be incredible.”

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**High resolution images are available upon request. For more information and interviews, please contact:**

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**Notes to editors:**

- <sup>1</sup> Redonda harbours a number of endemic species that occur nowhere else in the world, including at least five species of reptiles, such as the Redonda ground dragon (*Ameiva atrata*). In 2015 all of the surviving reptile species were evaluated by IUCN as Critically Endangered, meaning they face an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild.
- <sup>2</sup> Important Bird Areas are designated based on internationally agreed criteria and represent areas that hold the greatest significance for conservation of the world’s birds. See <http://www.birdlife.org/worldwide/programmes/sites-habitats-ibas>. Redonda has regionally- and globally-significant colonies of seabirds, including brown boobies, masked boobies, red-footed boobies, magnificent frigate birds and red-billed tropicbirds.
- <sup>3</sup> The black or ship rats (*Rattus rattus*) that occupy Redonda are among the largest recorded members of this species, and have been observed hunting and killing the island’s lizards and seabirds. Diet analyses have shown they also consume large quantities of plants and invertebrates.
- <sup>4</sup> Christopher Columbus named the island in 1493 and claimed it for Spain. Redonda was later transferred to the British Crown and around 7,000 tonnes of seabird guano was harvested annually from 1865 to 1914. It is believed that rats were introduced to the island during this period. The mining community was disbanded during World War I, after which the island was uninhabited. In 1967, Redonda became a dependency of Antigua & Barbuda.
- <sup>5</sup> The islands restored by the Offshore Islands Conservation Programme in Antigua’s North East Marine Management Area support significantly higher densities of native plants, invertebrates and vertebrate animals than islands that still have rats. The recovery of Caribbean wildlife can be remarkably swift. For example, after removing black rats from Pelican Island in 2014, seabirds that had been absent for decades returned within the same year and the island’s rare and endemic lizards more than doubled within 18 months.

**About the Environmental Awareness Group (EAG)** ([www.eagantigua.org](http://www.eagantigua.org))

Founded in 1989, the EAG is the oldest national, non-governmental, and not-for profit organization in Antigua and Barbuda whose main focus is the care and longevity of the environment. The EAG strives to develop a society informed and empowered to sustainably use and manage its natural resources. The EAG has partnered with international and local organizations to manage five successful conservation projects, including the multi-award winning Offshore Islands Conservation Programme, and trained and enlisted a large number of local volunteers.

**About the Department of Environment ([www.environmentdivision.info](http://www.environmentdivision.info))**

The Department of Environment is responsible for sustainable environmental protection and management and the provision of the framework financial mechanism to execute these activities. The Department undertakes coordination of environmental management through collaboration with various government agencies, private persons and NGO's. The Department also coordinates the implementation of several Multilateral Environmental Agreements to which Antigua and Barbuda are party.

**About Fauna & Flora International (FFI) ([www.fauna-flora.org](http://www.fauna-flora.org))**

FFI protects threatened species and ecosystems worldwide, choosing solutions that are sustainable, based on sound science and take account of human needs. Operating in more than 50 countries worldwide FFI saves species from extinction and habitats from destruction, while improving the livelihoods of local people. Founded in 1903, FFI is the world's longest established international conservation body and a registered charity.

**About British Mountaineering Council (BMC) ([www.thebmc.co.uk](http://www.thebmc.co.uk))**

Established in 1944, the BMC is the national organisation for climbers and hill walkers in England and Wales, with 81,000 members. It has substantial expertise in all aspects of the cliff access and safety, and promotes environmental best practice. Chief Executive Officer Dave Turnbull (25 years worldwide mountaineering experience) and Adam Long (founder of industrial rope access company Access Techniques Ltd) conducted the first access and safety assessment of Redonda in 2011.

**About Wildlife Management International Ltd (WMIL) ([www.wmil.co.nz](http://www.wmil.co.nz))**

Based in Blenheim, New Zealand, WMIL is an ecological consultancy dedicated to research and conservation of nature. Islands around the world have been devastated by the effects of alien invasive species. WMIL has over 30 years of experience in the eradication of these pests from islands. Due to strict regulations governing the use of rodenticides in Europe and other areas of the world, WMIL developed a ground-based bait station and baiting programme that minimised non-target exposure whilst still ensuring pest eradication. Using these methods we have successfully eradicated mice, rats, feral cats and rabbits from over 20 islands around the world. Usually in partnership with local conservation organisations and resident island communities, these eradications have been the first step in the islands' restoration, leading the way for species recovery.

**About Island Conservation (IC) ([www.islandconservation.org](http://www.islandconservation.org))**

IC is our world's only global, not-for-profit conservation organization whose mission is to prevent extinctions by removing invasive species from islands. We work where the concentration of both biodiversity and species extinction is greatest— islands. Removing a primary threat— introduced invasive vertebrates— is one of the most critical interventions for saving threatened plants and animals and restoring island ecosystems. Once invasive species are removed, native island species and ecosystems recover with little additional intervention. Over the past 20 years, IC and partners have deployed teams to protect 994 populations of 389 species on 52 islands. IC is headquartered in Santa Cruz, CA with field offices in Australia, British Columbia, Chile, Ecuador, Hawaii, New Zealand, and Puerto Rico.