



island resources
FOUNDATION



Media Release

For immediate release

World's rarest snake back from the brink of extinction

Tuesday 2 November 2010 - Conservationists working in the West Indies have made incredible progress in saving the rarest snake on the planet, the Antiguan racer (scientific name: *Alsophis antiquae*). The population has dramatically climbed from just 50 individuals in the mid-nineties to over 500 today.

The ten-fold increase is due to the successful partnership of six local and international organizations that make up the Antiguan Racer Conservation Project. The initiative has carried out nation-wide environmental education, the removal of alien rats that attacked the snakes and a pioneering reintroduction programme. Remarkably, the snake conservation efforts have also benefited other native wildlife that share its habitat, with the number of birds having increased by 30-fold in 15 years.

Research by British and Antiguan scientists in 1995 discovered only 50 Antiguan racers survived, all confined to the 8-hectare Great Bird Island, off the coast of Antigua. The mongoose, an Asian species introduced by humans, wiped out the snakes from mainland Antigua, while another alien species, Eurasian black rats, attacked the last of the species on Great Bird Island. The defenceless snakes were also killed by people. Hence, the Antiguan Racer Conservation Project was launched as an emergency bid to save the critically endangered species from imminent extinction.

Now celebrating its 15th anniversary, the Project has removed rats from 12 of Antigua's offshore islands and increased the snake population by ten-fold. Through careful re-introduction of individual snakes, the area occupied by the Antiguan racer has been boosted eight-fold to 63 hectares. The snakes have become accepted, even liked, by local residents and visitors. Trained local volunteers monitor the wildlife and keep their islands rat-free. The Antiguan racer still faces many challenges, including global sea level rise, but a new action plan is being developed which is expected to find additional areas where the snakes can be re-established and protected.

"I am proud we proved the pessimists wrong, and turned the fortunes of this unique and endearing animal", said Dr Jenny Daltry, FFI Senior Conservation Biologist. *"Many people have contributed over the years, but special credit must go to the local volunteers. This success is a testament to their dedication."*

Dr Brian Smith, a Professor in Biology at Black Hills State University, adds, *"Working with students in Antigua has been a highlight of my professional career. Being part of an international collaboration to rescue this snake from the brink of extinction has been immensely gratifying"*.

"Although the population of the racer has grown by leaps, we cannot stop now", warns Natalya Lawrence, Programme Coordinator, Environmental Awareness Group. *"There is still a need for public awareness, continued monitoring, and stronger laws to protect the snake and other endangered species on our islands."*

Removing rats from a dozen offshore islands has benefitted many other Antiguan species beyond the snake. For example, Caribbean brown pelicans have increased from only two breeding pairs to more than 60 pairs on the first islands to be restored, while rare white-crowned pigeons have exploded from five pairs to more than 450 pairs. Sea turtles and lizards have also benefitted from reduced predation of their eggs by rats and even the plant life has improved.

"An important by-product of the Antiguan Racer Conservation Project has been to demonstrate a globally-relevant model for conservation of biodiversity", said Bruce Potter, President of Island Resources Foundation. *"Offshore islands are being turned*

into reserves where public and private organizations can control invasive species and manage tourism development pressures more effectively”.

In 2006, the offshore islands became part of a major new marine protected area: the North East Marine Management Area. This stunningly beautiful area draws at least 50,000 local and international visitors every year and covers a quarter of Antigua’s coastline, making it the country’s largest protected area for biodiversity conservation.

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

About the Antiguan Racer Conservation Project

The Antiguan Racer Conservation Project was founded in 1995 and co-managed by six national and international organizations: Environmental Awareness Group, Forestry Unit (Ministry of Agriculture, Housing, Lands and the Environment), Black Hills State University, Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, Fauna & Flora International, and the Island Resources Foundation. The project operates as part of the Offshore Islands Conservation Programme, which works to restore and conserve Antigua’s offshore island ecosystems for the benefit of biodiversity and local people. The project’s current sponsors are the **Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund, Mohammed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, Syngenta** and **US Fish and Wildlife Service** (Critically Endangered Animals Conservation Fund and Neotropical Migratory Birds Conservation Act).

About Fauna & Flora International (FFI) (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 40 countries worldwide – mainly in the developing world – 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 the Environmental Awareness Group (EAG) (www.eaqantigua.org)

Founded in 1989, the EAG is still the only 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 and trained and enlisted a large number of local volunteers.

About Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust (Durrell) (www.durrell.org)

Durrell is an international charity working globally to save species from extinction. Headquartered in Jersey, Channel Islands, Durrell works in 14 countries worldwide, focusing on Critical Species and Islands at Risk. Durrell has a unique structure, based around three core pillars of specialisation: a wildlife park in Jersey, field programmes around the world and an International Training Centre. In the Eastern Caribbean, Durrell is based in Saint Lucia and presently supports conservation efforts in Saint Lucia, Montserrat and Antigua.

About the Forestry Unit

Situated within the Ministry of Agriculture, Lands, Housing and Environment, the Forestry Unit has responsibility for managing Antigua and Barbuda's forests and woodland areas and for reforestation. In recent years, the Unit has become increasingly involved in biodiversity conservation and eco-tourism development.

About Black Hills State University (BHSU) (www.bhsu.edu)

BHSU is a comprehensive state university of 4,000 students located in the Black Hills of South Dakota, USA. Students from the university have participated in research on Antigua with Antiguan and other students from around the Caribbean.

About Island Resources Foundation (IRF) (www.irf.org)

Founded in the US Virgin Islands in 1972, IRF is dedicated to the premise that islands are special places, with particularly fragile environments and exceptionally vulnerable development options. IRF's primary geographic focus is the insular Caribbean, and its central mission is to assist small islands to meet the challenges of social, economic and institutional growth while protecting and enhancing their environments.

Further information

High resolution photos of the Antiguan racer snake and other images from this work are available upon request.

For an interview with Dr Jenny Daltry, FFI Senior Conservation Biologist, herpetologist and a founding member of this project, please contact:

Rebecca Foges

Fauna & Flora International Communications Officer

Tel: +44 (0)1223 579 491

rebecca.foges@fauna-flora.org

For an interview with the Environmental Awareness Group's national project manager in Antigua, please contact:

Natalya Lawrence

Programme Coordinator,

Offshore Islands Conservation Programme

Environmental Awareness Group

Tel: + 1 268 462 6236

eag@candw.ag