

# Re-introduction of Fiji Crested Iguanas

## Objective



Classified as Critically endangered, on the IUCN Red List, the Fiji crested iguana - known to scientists as *Brachylophus vitiensis* - are only known from a few Fijian islands including: Yadua Tabu, Macuata, and Monuriki, and nowhere else on Earth.

The land area of Monuriki is only 40 hectares, and yet, somehow, it is home to crested iguanas—whose ancestral origins are still a mystery to scientists. They look like neon-colored dragons with their bright green bodies and dorsal crests.

They are camouflaged to hide in Fiji's forests.

*Our objective was to work with the traditional landowners (Mataqali Vunaivi of Yanuya Village) and key stakeholders to protect and restore the tiny island of Monuriki, home to these endangered species.*

### Special points of interest:

- Their closest iguana relatives are more than 8,000km away in the Galapagos and southwestern North America.
- The ancestral origins of these iguanas are still a mystery to scientists.
- Following the removal of invasives previously unrecorded seabirds such as the wedge-tailed shearwater are now being observed.

## Approach

Landowners, NTF, and partners have been restoring the habitat on Monuriki since 2011. They have painstakingly removed all rats and goats that were eating the eggs and hatchlings of the Fiji crested iguana and destroying their food source.

Iguanas were removed from the island and bred in captivity at Kula Eco Park at Korotogo. Hatched iguanas were raised to an age and length sufficient to increase their odds of surviving predators. 32 young iguanas each with a unique microchip inserted to identify them, were released on Monuriki Island. When they are recaptured, their growth and health can be recorded and compared.

## Relevance to INTO members



To protect and restore the small island of Monuriki adds to global biodiversity and is a credit to the foresight of the traditional landowners and the support provided by the international community.

Initial funding was provided by the Critical Ecosystems Profile Fund, technical assistance and funding support was also provided by Taronga Zoo Australia, San Diego Zoo and USGIS USA, and the Pacific Invasives Initiative (PII) New Zealand.

INTO members have the wonderful opportunity to volunteer with this project, actively contributing towards monitoring, community awareness and environmental education, or tour guide training and product development.

## Progress

IN May 2015, 32 captive bred iguanas were released on Monuriki, making this the first Fiji endangered species ever to have been bred in captivity and introduced into the wild. Australian, U.S., and Fijian scientists will track the survival of these 32 young iguanas.



The island is also a source of income for the landowners who now have an opportunity to expand their tourism product. "We have been blessed with this restoration project for Monuriki Island as the island is a major source of income for the whole village," states the village spokesman. "This project has also made us realize how important it is to protect the island, for our children's livelihood in the future and also for this very special iguana, the sea birds and other plants and animals that live in it."



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