

St Lucia's endemic reptile population on the verge of extinction

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Fer-de-lance

CASTRIES, St Lucia -- A nationwide scientific study of St Lucia's reptiles and amphibians, completed this month, has uncovered that the island's endemic reptile populations are approaching critically low levels. The study, under the National Forest Demarcation and Bio-Physical Resource Inventory Project, also reports that these species face extinction if measures are not taken to conserve St Lucia's unique forest biodiversity.

Head herpetologist Dr Jenny Daltry, a two-time National Geographic grantee and 2005 Emerging Explorer, states that among the 28 species of lizards, snakes and frogs there is a high number of species endemic to St Lucia. "In total there are seven endemic species and five subspecies which have been recorded," states Daltry. However, the findings show that the forests habitats with the highest diversity and abundance of these species are found largely outside of the protected forests areas.

"Drawing on historical records and comparisons with other West Indian islands, this study found most of St Lucia's native forest species have declined significantly in population size with some at critically low levels," states Daltry. "By applying the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) categories of threat, at least six reptiles native to St Lucia are now qualified as globally threatened with extinction."

These critically endangered species include the St Lucia Racer and the St Lucia Iguana, with the St Lucia Whiptail Lizard falling into the endangered category. Other vulnerable species on the list are the St Lucia Pygmy Gecko, the St Lucia Thread Snake and St Lucia Viper.

The St Lucia Viper, commonly known as the Fer-de-lance, is one of the endemic species of particular concern. Project team leader Dr Bob Tennent acknowledged the significance and value of Dr Daltry's work noting that the report contained important findings. "It will be contentious that she has found the St Lucia Fer-de-lance is now classified as a species vulnerable to extinction, but this is an important snake as it is found only in St Lucia."

The study shows that in 1900, the geographical location of the snake extended from the Choc River in the north to the Cannells River in the south of the island. The report now reveals the Fer-de-lance is limited to two fragmented areas between Fond D'or and Grand Anse on the northeast coast, and between Dennery and Praslin on the east coast extending across the interior of the island to Canaries and Anse La Raye on the west coast. The Fer-de-lance and other reptilian species are at risk due habitat destruction as a result of continuous deforestation that is prevalent on private lands, especially along the island's coastal zones.

Other root causes for the declines includes, alien invasive animals such as the opossum (manicou), rats, dogs, cats, feral pigs, the mongoose and other alien invasive reptiles and amphibians. Hunting and agrochemical pollution are also significantly associated with the decrease in numbers.

Adams Toussaint from the Forestry Department states that the rapid decrease in the Fer-de-lance population represent a fast-growing trend leading to extinction if timely conservation measures and management intervention is not developed and implemented. "The St Lucia Wildlife Protection Act of 1980 has classified the Fer-de-lance as an unprotected reptile. There is therefore an urgent call for a further review of some aspects of the Act," said Toussaint. "Increased public interest in and awareness of St Lucia's reptiles and amphibians as well as heightened public understanding of the impact of alien invasive animals is also paramount to the conservation of these reptile species."

The study represents a comprehensive effort to catalogue and understand the reptile and amphibian biodiversity of St Lucia's ecosystems. The findings will be used for development and implementation of conservation and management plans and to create greater awareness of the local flora and fauna, especially their importance and vulnerability.

The reptile and amphibian report is one of fifteen reports which will be released before the end of the year. The project is funded by the EU under the SFA 2003 'Environment Management Fund' and is implemented by the Banana Industry Trust.

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