

TRAVELOGUE

Revisiting the “Real” Cuba

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During the relaxation period at the end of class, my favorite yoga teacher tells her students to “take a moment to acknowledge all the blessings in your lives.” To that I add, “and be grateful for all the cool experiences!” I feel very fortunate to have had the recent opportunity to return to the “real” Cuba for the 14th annual Iguana Specialist Group (ISG) meeting in Cuba in November 2010.

As part of my work in iguana conservation at the San Diego Zoo Institute for Conservation Research, I had worked on the military base at Guantánamo Bay more than a dozen times during as many trips before being invited to participate in a Population Habitat and Viability Analysis (PHVA) workshop for the Cuban Iguana (*Cyclura nubila*) in January 2003. This meeting was hosted by the Havana Zoo (Jardín Zoo de La Habana) and the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (CBSG) and brought together iguana and conservation specialists from throughout Cuba and a

few from abroad. As an invited guest to a scientific meeting, I was legally permitted by the United States government to visit Cuba, although in those days the U.S. trade embargo was very strict and restrictive. Cuba’s economy was tightly controlled and the separation between currency for Cuban nationals and that which foreigners could use was well defined. We could eat only in specific restaurants and opportunities to buy souvenirs were almost non-existent. Even the famous ice cream park, Coppelia, had a very sedate indoor cafe for tourists only, in contrast to the large, bustling and vibrant local side. Thankfully, my two colleagues from the CBSG and I were escorted to see numerous sights within Habana Vieja (Old Havana) by our hosts from the zoo. It was a very brief but wonderful trip that left me wanting to return.

This time my trip included a little more time in Havana and a journey to the far western-most point for the meeting site. Travel restrictions for



ALISON ALBERTS

Castillo de los Tres Reyes del Morro, the fort and lighthouse at the entrance to the Havana harbor.



TANDORA GRANT

Old U.S. and Russian-made cars at the harbor parking lot in Habana Vieja. Graffiti-styled paintings of Cuban heroes, like this one of Che, are common on public buildings.



JEAN-PIERRE MONTAGNE

The Catholic cathedral in old Havana (Habana Vieja).



MACHEL EMANUEL

1960 Chevrolet Impala in Habana Vieja.

U.S. citizens have eased somewhat for people with relatives in Cuba, and direct flights from Miami to Havana are now available. Still, the logistics of organizing travel clearance for a delegation of 50 people were migraine-headache worthy. We are very grateful to ISG member Joe Burgess and Luis Díaz Beltrán (Curator of Herpetology at the Museo Nacional de Historia Natural) and his wife Arianna, who is a “nature tourism specialist”



TANDORA GRANT

Public mosaic art in a section of the community park near José Martí Stadium, Habana Vieja.



JOSEPH BURGESS

The seat of the government before The Revolución, the Capitolio Nacional Cuba on the edge of Habana Vieja, is now home to the Ministries of Science, Technology, and Environment.



EVERETT HENNINGHEIM

Waves regularly crash over the breakwater along the Malecón, Habana Vieja.

with Cubatur, for making our trip possible. When we arrived in Havana, everyone immediately started photographing the 1950s-era American-made cars in the airport parking lot. This was the first of many signs that life in Cuba is radically different from other Caribbean islands and its neighbor to the north a mere 90 miles away.

A first-day, five-hour bus and walking tour of the capital city focused mostly on Habana Vieja. Among the highlights, the group saw the capitol, the cathedral, the Granma Memorial, the Museo de la Revolución, the Malecón, and famous haunts of Ernest Hemingway; they also toured the rum museum and had a traditional meal at the El Patio restaurant. The buildings in the Vieja area are almost entirely Spanish colonial and neoclassical architecture, and many of them have been restored to their original grandeur. Sadly, buildings in need of serious repairs are equally common. Since my previous trip, I had the impression that the number of bars, restaurants, and patio cafes had increased exponentially — and all were open and filled with Cubans, foreign workers, and tourists alike. Little alcoves offered souvenirs and crafts for sale, and artists were busily painting. As before, however, music and singing filled the streets, emanating from the restaurant/bars or from little groups of friends harmonizing together.

Since I had been to Havana previously and knew there would be more time at the end of the week for sight-seeing, I opted to spend the afternoon with my fellow San Diego Zoo colleague, Jean-Pierre Montagne, whose mother's family is from Cuba and who had arranged to visit with friends of relatives. Our hotel was in the Miramar suburb, across the street from the giant obelisk-shaped Russian embassy. This area is the center for foreign embassies and businesses; the houses are noticeably larger and more affluent, and the cars are more modern and European. Our first stop was for lunch at nearby El Aljibe, an open-walled thatched-roof restaurant where I had been before. I knew to forgo the menu and order the roast chicken special that comes with loads of traditional sides, like plantains, rice and black beans, fried potatoes, and salad. Of course, we also enjoyed our first (and arguably the best) of many Mojitos during the trip. We spent a lovely afternoon visiting with the childhood friend of Jean-Pierre's aunt — looking at old photographs and chatting about lost relatives, travel restrictions, a recent performance by the American Ballet Theater, and plants in her garden. As I noticed throughout Cuba, her home is modest compared to the U.S. average, but exquisitely clean and tidy. She was an absolutely charming hostess. Later, we wandered the nighttime streets and plazas of Habana Vieja, attracted to several happening spots by the infectious music from live bands. All our pictures that night are blurry because capturing moving musicians while your hips are swaying and toes are tapping was simply impossible!

The next day, we boarded a coach for the journey to the Guanahacabibes Peninsula in Pinar del Río Province. The trip took almost the entire day. At first we traveled through mostly agrarian landscape and



EVERETT HENNINGHEIM

Morning sun over the Miramar suburb of Havana.



JEAN-PIERRE MONTAGNE

“Pregnant palms” at our first roadside rest stop on the way from Havana to the northwestern coast. Many species of palms in Cuba are harvested for wood and thatch.



JEAN-PIERRE MONTAGNE

Horse-drawn carts are common, and often used for public transportation in this town on the way to the western coast.



MICHAEL FOURNIER

Agricultural fields along the route from Havana to Guanahacabibes are plowed with teams of oxen.



JEAN-PIERRE MONTAGNE

The only billboards in Cuba depict heroes and governmental ideals. “51 years of struggles and victories” refers to the time elapsed since the Cuban Revolution, and features Ernesto “Che” Guevara and Fidel Castro.

small towns. Glued to the bus window, I reflected on the many differences compared to other countries I have visited. A huge difference is the lack of product advertising so pervasive in most global cultures. The only “billboards” I saw were artistic paintings depicting heroes of the Revolution and “advertising” governmental ideals and slogans. In some ways, rural Cuba seems very modern, with every house connected to an electrical wire, and yet we passed fields being plowed by oxen. Horse-driven carts were com-

mon and appeared to serve as local buses. From my perspective of excessive abundance, Cuba is poor, but the poverty has a different face — no signs of malnutrition, and everyone has clean and well-kept clothes. Above all, absolutely no trash litters the roadsides or towns.

After several hours, the road became narrow and winding as we passed through an area dominated by inland limestone hills and cliffs full of caves and sharp edges. I daydreamed about rock climbing and finding snakes and frogs among the “diente de perro” (dog’s tooth) karst of the Guaniguanico Mountain Range. When we finally arrived at the western end of the island and literally the end of the road — Maria la Gorda, a diving and nature-focused hotel on the white sand beach of Bahia de Corrientes and miles from any other habitation, we were welcomed by fellow iguana biologists and conservationists from other parts of Cuba. I was disappointed to hear that Vincente Berovides from the Universidad de la Habana, whom I had met previously at the Cuban Iguana PHVA, was not going to be able to join us. However, I was delighted to finally meet Orlando Garrido from the Museo Nacional de Historia Natural, whose many manuscripts on Cuban herpetology and avifauna I had read (he also was a former tennis pro!). We learned he is currently writing a reference on Cuban fish that will include photographs. Throughout the week, we were thoroughly charmed by his animated anecdotes.

Our meetings were held at the visitor center and headquarters for the Guanahacabibes National Park. The park includes most of the peninsula and comprises 23,880 ha of land and 15,950 ha of sea. The area is home to 704 plant, 16 amphibian, 35 reptilian, 192 avian, and 18 mammalian spe-

cies, many of which are locally endemic. The United Nations has included this region in its World Network of Biosphere Reserves and it is of major economic importance as a spawning site for fish and invertebrates in the Caribbean. We had nearly three full days of presentations and discussions,

with updates on iguana projects in the Greater and Lesser Antilles, Central America, Fiji, and Cuba. I was particularly interested in the eight talks presented by our Cuban colleagues, since so much had been accomplished toward monitoring and mapping the distribution and abundance of iguanas throughout Cuba — exactly what the PHVA group had determined was needed! A few studies also have been conducted on diet, morphological variation, reproduction, genetics, threats, and human use and attitudes. As is true for most Cuban herpetofauna, the biggest threat to iguanas is habitat alteration and fragmentation.



MIGUEL GARCIA

The author talks to the Cuban herpetological and ornithological hero, Orlando Garrido.



STEVE CONNERS

One of two species of *Amphisbaena* found in Cuba, this captive Cuban Spotted Amphisbaena (*Cadea blanoides*) was shown to us by Luis Díaz, Curator of Herpetology at the National Museum of Natural History.



JOSEPH BURGESS

Cuban Treefrog (*Osteopilus septentrionalis*) on the Guanahacabibes Peninsula.



CAROLINE LEGOUZ

Field trip to the rocky limestone cliff habitat along the western coast of the Guanahacabibes Peninsula where iguanas were the most abundant.



JEAN-PIERRE MONTAGNE

Sunset view at Maria la Gorda, a hotel specializing in scuba diving in the marine protected area of Parque Nacional, Guanahacabibes Peninsula.

Cuba has a National System of Protected Areas (SNAP) that includes 253 sites and represents nearly 20% of the country, including areas of the sea shelf to depths of 200 m. Its mission is to protect biological diversity and promote sustainable development. Protected areas vary with respect to their legal status, administrative and authoritative structure, and conservation value. For example, management plans for an Ecological Reserve will be very different from that of a Managed Resource Protected Area. Proposals for new protected areas begin with approval at the local level and move up to the main national council. The first national park was established in Holguín Province in 1930, and the most recent, declared just this year, will include the highest peak in the central Guamuha Mountains. Only a few species of Cuba's reptiles and amphibians are not currently found in these protected areas, and efforts to include them in an ever-expanding network are ongoing.

In the evenings, most of our group went "herping by headlamp," either by themselves or in small groups led by Luis Díaz. I was happy to see a Cuban Treefrog (*Osteopilus septentrionalis*), not my first, since they are invasive to many places now, but finally somewhere it is supposed to be! This feeling was not quite as intense as my joy at finding Cane Toads (*Rhinella marina*) in the Amazon and for once being able to appreciate their existence rather than cringing at their presence! We also enjoyed a day-long field trip exploring the entire length of the bay through the forest and along the open rocky coast at the western-most point of Cuba. In the cliff zone, we had our best views of Cuban Iguanas, which were quite cryptic and shy. We also saw first-hand the consequences of recent road widening for the

development of tourism. We learned that iguana density in this zone had been reduced from 17.2 to 4.0 iguanas/ha during construction of the road. Guanahacabibes park staff is working on an educational program for tourists and local residents to reduce the incidence of vehicular casualties.



ALISON ALBERTS

Male Cuban Iguana (*Cyclura nubila*) on the open rocky coast of the northwestern Guanahacabibes Peninsula.



JEAN-PIERRE MONTAGNE

Forest death on the Guanahacabibes Peninsula after Hurricane Ivan where a former freshwater depression became saline.



JEAN-PIERRE MONTAGNE

We found desiccated Cuban Iguana (*Cyclura nubila*) carcasses alongside the road on the Guanahacabibes Peninsula; their deaths were most likely attributable to automobiles.



JEAN-PIERRE MONTAGNE

The rocky coastline at the western-most point of Cuba, the Guanahacabibes Peninsula. Even remote areas are not immune to flotsam trash washed ashore.



JEAN-PIERRE MONTAGNE

Blooming *Plumeria* found in the rocky limestone cliff habitat along the western coast of the Guanahacabibes Peninsula where iguanas were the most abundant.



MIGUEL GARCIA

Allison Alberts, the author, Orlando Garrido, Cielo Figuerola, and Bonnie Raphael (holding Orlando's field guide to the birds of the West Indies).

Toward the tip of the peninsula, we stopped at a depression where all the trees had died after Hurricane Ivan in 2004. This was an area that used to collect fresh water during seasonal rainfall, but the hurricane had substantially altered the land such that it now connects to the saline ocean and is toxic to those trees. At a nearby pond, we also had far-away views of an American Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*) and Cuban Slider (*Trachemys decussata*), which is the only freshwater turtle in Cuba. Thanks to Orlando and his field guide, we identified some great birds. These included the Red-legged Thrush (*Turdus plumbeus*), Black-throated Blue Warbler



JOSEPH BURGESS

Cuban Trogon (*Priotelus temnurus*) on the Guanahacabibes Peninsula.

Species Encountered During the Trip

Joseph Burgess

Lizards

Cuban Ameiva (*Ameiva auberi*)
 Spanish Flag Anole (*Anolis allogus*)
 Cuban Twig Anole (*Anolis angusticeps*)
 Pinar del Rio Cliff Anole (*Anolis bartschi*)
 Cuban Giant Anole (*Anolis equestris*)
 Cuban White-fanned Anole (*Anolis homolechis*)
 Western Giant Anole (*Anolis luteogularis*)
 Red-fanned Rock Anole (*Anolis mestrei*)
 Cuban Green Anole (*Anolis porcatius*)
 Cuban Eyespot Anole (*Anolis quadricellifer*)
 Cuban Brown Anole (*Anolis sagrei*)
 Cuban Stream Anole (*Anolis vermiculatus*)
 Cuban Spotted Amphisbaena (*Cadea blanooides*)
 (captive individual)
 Cuban Iguana (*Cyclura nubila*)
 House Gecko (*Hemidactylus* sp.)
 Saw-scaled Curlytail (*Leiocephalus carinatus*)
 Cuban Striped Curlytail (*Leiocephalus stictigaster*)
 Ashy Sphaero (*Sphaerodactylus elegans*)
 Brown-speckled Sphaero (*Sphaerodactylus notatus*)
 Cuban Giant Gecko (*Tarentola americana*)

Snakes

Cuban Racer (*Cubophis cantherigerus*)
 Cuban Boa (*Epicrates angulifer*)
 Giant Trope (*Tropidophis melanurus*)

Turtles

Cuban Slider (*Trachemys decussata*)

Crocodiles

American Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*)

Frogs & Toads

Cuban Groin-spot Frog (*Eleutherodactylus atkinsi*)
 Guanahacabibes Frog (*Eleutherodactylus guanahacabibes*)
 Cuban Treefrog (*Osteopilus septentrionalis*)
 Western Giant Toad (*Peltophryne fustiger*)



JOSEPH BURGESS

Cuban Racer (*Cubophis cantherigerus*) on the Guanahacabibes Peninsula.

(*Dendroica caerulescens*), Loggerhead Kingbird (*Tyrannus caudifasciatus*), Cuban Trogon (*Priotelus temnurus*), Cuban Grassquit (*Tiaris canora*), and a juvenile Cuban Black Hawk (*Buteogallus gundlachi*). I particularly enjoyed listening to the calls of Cuban Crows (*Corvus nasicus*) that sound something like giggling turkeys.

On our last day at Guanahacabibes, I was delighted to have time to work with Cuban biologists to collect more information on current iguana research. One of my latest projects for the Iguana Specialist Group is to coordinate the creation or revision of Red List Assessments for all species in the family Iguanidae. The IUCN Red List is the world's most comprehensive



ALISON ALBERTS

Sub-group workshop to revise the IUCN Red List assessment of the Cuban Iguana.



JOSEPH BURGESS

Cuban Racer (*Cubophis cantherigerus*) eating a Cuban Treefrog (*Osteopilus septentrionalis*), Guanahacabibes Peninsula.

sive and objective database on biodiversity, and it plays a prominent role in guiding conservation activities for governments and scientists. In addition to the text that is viewable on the Red List website (www.iucnredlist.org), considerable data are recorded on each species' natural history, habitat, threats, and research and conservation actions. When the last assessment for *Cyclura nubila* was written, very little was known about its distribution, and most of that was inferred from our knowledge of the population at Guantánamo Bay. Being a data geek, I was thrilled to absorb the new information from the rest of the island. Having just been through the Mona Island Iguana assessment the previous night, I was very grateful for assis-



IAN RECCHIO

Ashy Sphaero (*Sphaerodactylus elegans*) on the Guanahacabibes Peninsula.



JEAN-PIERRE MONTAGNE

An unknown species of butterfly on the Guanahacabibes Peninsula.



JEAN-PIERRE MONTAGNE

Limestone cliff/hills (mogotes) characterize the landscape of the Viñales Valley in north-central Pinar del Río Province. Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*) are visible in the foreground.

tance from Miguel Garcia and Cielo Figuerola, who served as interpreters during the evaluation for *C. nubila*.

We took a slightly different route on the return trip back to Havana through the Viñales Valley. The little teaser of limestone hills we saw previously was small potatoes compared to the beauty of this national park! We stopped for a fabulous banquet lunch at an area where you could also tour part of the cave system by boat. Around the outsides of the caves, most of



JEAN-PIERRE MONTAGNE

A juvenile endemic Cuban Black Hawk (*Buteogallus gundlachi*) on the Guanahacabibes Peninsula.



JOSEPH BURGESS

Cuban Fruit-eating Bat (*Brachyphylla nana*) in the Viñales Valley, Pinar del Río Province.



JOSEPH BURGESS

Pinar del Rio Cliff Anole (*Anolis bartschi*) in the Viñales Valley, Pinar del Río Province.



JOSEPH BURGESS

Cuban Stream Anole (*Anolis vermiculatus*) in the Viñales Valley, Pinar del Río Province.

us saw *Anolis vermiculatus* and *A. bartschi*, two amazing anoles endemic to this region.

Our last morning in Havana was spent either sightseeing or touring the larger of Havana's two zoos, Parque Zoológico Nacional de Cuba. We learned about successful captive breeding for a very few of the Cuban reptiles — but no amphibians. Chytrid fungus has recently been discovered on the Cuban Long-nosed Toad (*Peltophryne longinasus*), and funds to develop an *ex situ* captive-breeding program and further monitoring of wild species have recently been obtained from the Amphibian Ark. For those of us working with captive programs, we hope that this meeting was a “door opener” for future collaborations where our experience can be of value.

Sixty-two species of amphibians (95% endemic) and 166 species of reptiles (83% endemic) are known to occur in Cuba. With just a few short days, we barely managed to scratch the surface of our Cuban life lists. Much of Cuba remains to be seen, and I for one cannot wait to return!

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Blunt-headed Treesnakes (*Uromacer catesbyi*) are elegant anuran-killing machines. The other species in the genus (*U. frenatus* and *U. oxyrhynchus*) are lizard specialists.