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By Gerardo García

British Channel Islands - A breeding programme designed to stabilise a species that plays a vital part of the Mauritian ecosystem is underway at Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust. With the arrival of 30 lesser night geckos, Durrell's herpetologists hope to breed up significant

numbers ready for their return to the wild in 2010.

The lesser night gecko (*Nactus coindemirensis*) is found on a small island off the southeast coast of Mauritius, called Ilot Vacoas. Historically, this small reptile was found throughout Mauritius and plays a crucial role in the food chain for many species of birds and reptiles.

Durrell is now working with the last southern population of these geckos in an attempt to maintain biodiversity and regional variation. This work is part of an ongoing conservation strategy to restore the unique fauna of the Mauritian islands involving the re-establishment of reptile communities. The project is a collaboration between Durrell, Mauritian Wildlife Foundation and National Parks and Conservation Service supported through a Darwin Initiative grant.



There are only 350 geckos remaining on Ilot Vacoas and as such very few individuals to initiate a new population elsewhere without an adverse impact upon those in the wild. Project staff have therefore harvested less than 10% of the population, which have been relocated to the Herpetological Department at Durrell for a captive breeding programme. It is hoped that success in the programme will mean they can be returned to Mauritius within eighteen months for release onto neighbouring island, Ile Marianne.

There are also plans to adapt one of Durrell's international training courses, to allow for greater participation by individuals from Mauritius in time for the 2010 intake. By training individuals from the country where these species originate, the Trust hopes to create the structure within which similar captive breeding programmes can be developed within Mauritius for the protection of their unique biodiversity.

Dr Nik Cole is based out in Mauritius: "By the early 1990s these little lizards were thought to have gone extinct, but the removal of rats from the islands and their subsequent recovery led to their rediscovery. Now we are attempting to restore them back to islands where they used to occur, but to do this we need the help of the reptile department here in Jersey.

"Whilst these geckos are the smallest of all the reptiles to have evolved in Mauritius they were possibly one of the most important. In their natural habitat they can occur in very high densities and would have supported other predatory reptiles and birds that fed upon them. These geckos represent the foundation for rebuilding the lost reptile communities of Mauritius in our ongoing efforts to restore unique island ecosystems."

The Trust has also taken delivery of ten Telfair's skinks (*Leiolopisma telfairii*) which were collected on a recent trip to Mauritius by Durrell's CEO, Paul Masterton. They will be on display at the Trust in the New



Year as part of a Mauritian exhibit, promoting Durrell's work in the region.

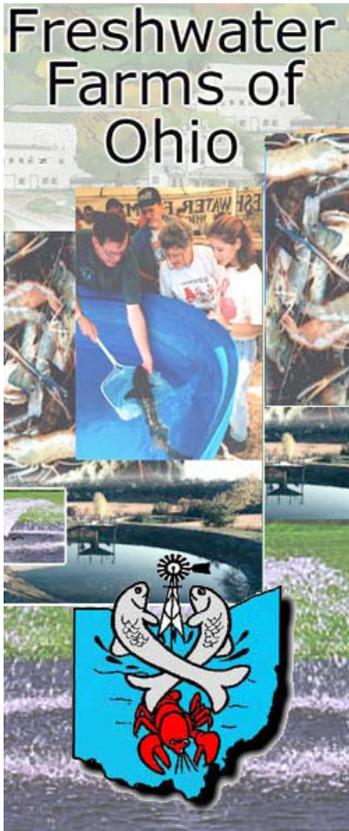
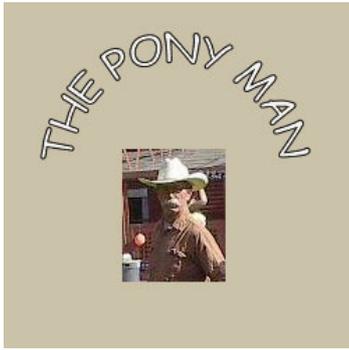


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