

For James "Skip" Lazell, a conservation biologist, home is Conanicut Island, off Rhode Island, where he runs the nonprofit Conservation Agency. But you're just as likely to find him in a small boat heading for an island to keep company with little-known insects, reptiles, and birds.

Burly and bearded, looking more like a lumberjack than a scientist, he's been crazy about animals since he was a young child. Lazell traces his passion for islands and explorations to the day after high school graduation, when he ventured off to the West Indies.

"I've always been especially fascinated by islands," he admits. "You feel you can get to know an island. My approach begins with questions: What lives here? What is unique about this particular island? Then: How can we study the unique attributes of this island without harming or destroying them? And, perhaps most important: How can I get the stakeholders – owners, managers, residents, visitors – to appreciate these unique attributes and keep them in place?"

"Guana, in the British Virgin Islands, is my flagship project. It has had long-term funding, interested owners, and a milieu where natural attributes are valued – if for no other reason than because ecotourism supports the local economy.

"But there are so many other islands."
(Continued on page 144)



A self-described "lizard hunter," Skip Lazell (above) brought iguanas back to Guana Island (below, as seen from Tortola).

J A M E S L A Z E L L

Restoring Rare Species

In the South China Sea, a little cluster called the Sokos could become one of the greatest resorts-plus-wildlife-sanctuaries on earth, because of its outstanding opportunities to restore muntjac deer, pangolins, civets, and ferret badgers."

Lazell jokes that he's just a "lizard hunter," but in truth he's more an island-hopping Sherlock Holmes keen to track rare and endangered species in faraway places. He's also had great success reintroducing species to places where they once lived – in a sense, restoring species back to the future.

"In the 1980s I brought eight stout iguanas to Guana Island," he tells me as one example. "Some were quite large, old adults. Several years went by with few iguana sightings. I would find their tracks or tail drags and sometimes see one, but most people did not. They came to believe I was just dreaming.

"Then, in 1989, came Hurricane Hugo. That storm did fearful damage to buildings and stripped virtually all the leaves off the vegetation. I am told Guana

looked like winter in New England.

"A few days later I got an excited telephone call from the island. 'Skip,' the manager exclaimed, 'you wouldn't believe it, but with the leaves off we can see the hillsides under the trees. There are iguanas everywhere!'

"Why save or restore species?" Lazell asks. "Ultimately, because the entire earth ecosystem upon which we depend requires diversity for stability. 'Stability' in a biological sense is always dynamic, never static – and diversity is required to maintain it.

"The good news is there are people out there besides me trying to save the natural diversity of islands and restore them," he says. "It's a slow process. But we win our small battles and try to glue them together as best we can."

