



Buck Island Reef National Monument

St. Croix Ground Lizard Translocation Project

March-April 2008

The St. Croix Ground Lizard (*Ameiva polops*) is a small species of ground-dwelling lizard, 3-4 inches snout to vent length, mostly black with narrow parallel stripes of brown, black, and white. The tail has alternating rings of bright blue and black. It spends most of its life darting along the ground, through leaf litter, hunting small insects, and hiding in underground burrows. *A. polops* was once widespread in coastal St. Croix but became globally endangered in the 1900s after the Indian mongoose (*Herpetes javanicus*) was introduced to the main island of St. Croix. Threatened by coastal development and predation by mongoose, feral cats and dogs, *A. polops* survives today on only three small near-shore cays around St. Croix and nowhere else in the world. It has been absent from the fourth larger, near shore island (Buck Island Reef), on which it is presumed to have been present until introduction of the small Indian mongoose in 1912.

Today the largest remaining population of *A. polops*, between 500-1000 individuals, resides on Green Cay, a 14.2 acre cay that lies 1.5 miles southwest of Buck Island. Green Cay became a National Wildlife Refuge in 1977 to offer protection to this lizard and its habitat. Two smaller populations reside on Protestant Cay (3.0 acres), an islet in Christiansted Harbor consisting of a hotel and maintained grounds; and Ruth Cay (27 acres), a flat, dredged-material islet located off the south shore of St. Croix in the shipping channel of a major oil refinery. Hotel on the Cay, Christiansted, is currently working in with VI Division of Fish & Wildlife to manage island vegetation and the cattle egret population for the benefit of *A. polops*. The *A. polops* population on Ruth Cay appears persistent and healthy, but the island has no formal protection.

Buck Island Reef NM was identified as the re-introduction site for *A. polops* in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Recovery Plan in 1984. Translocation of individuals of St. Croix ground lizard from the small population surviving on Green Cay National Wildlife Refuge to Buck Island Reef National Monument would be undertaken as a measure to mitigate the potential for catastrophic loss of remaining remnant populations from fire, flood, hurricane, tsunami, and non-native predation (primarily non-native mongoose). Translocation of Green Cay *A. polops* will establish a new population and will increase species range into a high quality habitat in a federally protected natural area.

In the 1980-1990s in preparation for *A. polops* reintroduction to the park the National Park Service successfully eliminated mongoose (*Herpetes javanicus*) and in 2001 controlled tree rats (*Rattus rattus*) on Buck Island Reef. In 2002 NPS conducted a habitat assessment to determine that all critical habitat requirements for *A. polops* existed in the park and that current nonnative plant control program would have no impact on translocation population. Buck Island Reef NM was deemed finally "ready" to receive the St. Croix Ground Lizard.



Buck Island Reef National Monument

In 2007/2008 NPS, in collaboration with USFWS, the Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources – Division of Fish and Wildlife (VIDPNR), and Texas A&M University herpetology team has proposed to undertake the translocation and re-introduction of *A. polops* to the park. The Draft Environmental Assessment for the Collection and Translocation of the St. Croix Ground Lizard to Buck Island Reef NM is available for comment. If approved, the preferred alternative would allow NPS and US Fish & Wildlife Service to translocate approximately 60 individuals to Buck Island Reef this spring. The translocation individuals will be marked and released into temporary enclosures located in the beach forest where they would be watched daily for months to ensure their survival and adaptation to the park. Their successful release into the park will celebrate a long awaited event.

The reintroduction of *A. polops* to the park is a valuable step in carrying out the National Park Service mandate to preserve and protect fragile natural resources and fulfill a long-term endangered species recovery goal for the species that began in the 1960s. The St. Croix Ground Lizard can never be successfully re-introduced to St. Croix therefore the success of the reintroduction to Buck Island Reef is vital; Buck Island Reef provides a federally protected area that will reduce the likelihood of *A. polops* extinction.

Copies of the Draft Environmental Assessment are available for review and comment at NPS Headquarters, Fort Christiansvaern, Christiansted, VI beginning March 26, 2008. For more information contact Zandy Hillis-Starr, Chief of Resource Management, at 340-773-1460 x 235 or Joel A. Tutein, Superintendent, at 340-773-1460 x 222.



Photo by Amy Mackay, 2007

Welcome Home!