

Ecological rescue mission for Mauritian reptiles affected by oil spill

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- Conservationists from Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, Mauritian Wildlife Foundation (MWF), BirdLife International, National Parks and Conservation Service of Mauritius (NPCS), and Forestry Service



have enabled the emergency rescue of three species of rare reptiles, which might otherwise be facing extinction, following the Wakashio oil spill in Mauritius. The reptile rescue was made possible with the support of the Jean Boulle Group and further builds on their history of conservation in Mauritius.

In the immediate aftermath of the spill small numbers of lesser night geckos, Bojer's skinks, and Bouton's skinks were captured from the southeast islands of Mauritius and held in a temporary bio-secure holding facility on the mainland. However, this was only a temporary solution. Yesterday the reptiles arrived at Jersey Zoo where they are receiving expert care from leading herpetologists and this safety net population will form a breeding programme from which the animals, their offspring or future generations can eventually be released back into the wild.

These Mauritian animals are the only surviving colony globally and just a few hundred individual reptiles of each species survive on the southeast islands of Mauritius. Without swift intervention, the impact of the Wakashio oil spill could have caused irreversible damage and pushed the reptiles closer to extinction.

On 25th July, the MV Wakashio freighter ran aground a few kilometres from nature reserves and national parks which are home to a variety of unique species of plant, bird, and reptile. Within days, approximately 1,000 tonnes of fuel oil leaked into the pristine ocean and the shores of these delicate ecosystems. The environmental catastrophe could be devastating half a century of conservation work and push already threatened species even closer to the brink of extinction.

Dr Nik Cole, Durrell's Islands Restoration Manager has 18 years' experience restoring island ecosystems in Mauritius, reducing and preventing species extinction. He explained:

"To ensure the long-term viability of these species it was vital that they were urgently moved to

Jersey Zoo, which has over 40 years' experience maintaining Mauritian reptile populations in captivity and which has world class herpetological and veterinary expertise. This is their only chance of survival as the facilities to maintain these reptiles and keep them safe from predators, foreign parasites and disease, long-term, is not currently available in Mauritius. Two of these species have never been held in captivity before, which highlights the expert care required for these animals."

Dr Vikash Tatayah, MWF Conservation Director, said:

"This rescue is our chance to prevent other Mauritian species following the same route as the Dodo, whose extinction wasn't immediately noticed. When the double crisis of the Wakashio oil-spill and the COVID-19 pandemic is consigned to memory, this effort could have avoided a "second dodo moment" for Mauritius. This rescue is our chance to save this unique Mauritian species and secure a lasting gene-pool, so that they can be re-introduced one day.

Everyone at MWF and Durrell is so grateful to the Jean Boulle Group who have understood how critical it is that we get these reptiles to Jersey Zoo as soon as possible so they are away from the environmental disaster zone."

Nathalie Boulle, for the Jean Boulle Group, said:

"For the last 25 years, our passion for the preservation of wildlife has led us to act in saving vulnerable species all over the world. As Mauritians, we are deeply troubled by the recent Wakashio Disaster. Our latest endeavour, in partnership with our friends at the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation, aims to take substantial steps in the conservation of 3 endemic species as well as helping create a lasting ecosystem whose value will be recognized long after the current crises have been consigned to history. As a founder patron of the Rare Bird Club, a major branch of BirdLife International, I know the importance of not letting decades of conservation work go to waste."

Durrell's Chief Executive Officer Dr Lesley Dickie said:

"This is a true emergency in which we had to act quickly and it is also a time when the combined zoo and field expertise of an institution like Durrell comes into its own. We have experts in the wild but we also have dedicated experts in captive care. In conservation, there is rarely a silver bullet solution to the problem. It is combining disciplines that provide for a dynamic and multifaceted approach, which is what is called for in fast-moving, critical situations like this.

While I am confident that we have the expertise across Durrell we can't do this without supporters and I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the Jean Boulle Group who have stepped in so generously to get this precious consignment to Jersey."

Patricia Zurita CEO of BirdLife International, said:

“This direct action to sustain vulnerable species in the wake of the oil spill in Mauritius will help both people and wildlife. These animals can now safely reach experienced hands before one day returning to their island home. The impact of a global pandemic makes saving endangered species a huge challenge so finding a way to achieve this is good news for the future economic and ecological prosperity of Mauritius. It shows what we can all achieve, in spite of circumstances, to safeguard the precious natural environment by collaborative effort between conservationists, government and supporters.”

These reptiles are unique to the islands of Mauritius and they serve an important role within the ecosystem, as predators, the prey of other threatened animals, but also as pollinators and seed dispersers of threatened plant species. A huge investment, of both time and money, has been made by Durrell, MWF, NPCS, and the Forestry Service over the past 14 years to rebuild the reptile communities on these islands and the oil spill has now put that work in jeopardy. The populations of the rescued species on the affected islands harbour a unique genetic makeup, absent from populations on other islands, which is important to preserve to allow the maximum genetic adaptability of the species long-term.

For the full release please visit: <https://jeanboullegroup.com/ecological-rescue-mission-for-mauritian-reptiles-affected-by-oil-spill/>

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