



Government of Bermuda
Ministry of Environment and Planning
OFFICE OF THE MINISTER

Ministerial Statement
To The House of Assembly

By

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Minister of Environment and Planning

Saving the Bermuda Skink
5th July, 2013

Thank you, Mr. Speaker

Mr. Speaker,

I rise this morning to report to the Members of this Honourable House and the people of Bermuda on the on-going efforts of the Ministry of Environment and Planning to preserve the Bermuda Rock lizard, or as it is better known, the Bermuda Skink.

Mr. Speaker,

Unfortunately, the urbanisation of the island that we are so privileged to enjoy comes with an environmental cost. It is the responsibility of the Ministry of Environment and Planning to do its best to mitigate these challenges and do everything in its power to preserve all that we can for future generations.

Mr. Speaker,

A lifeboat can be defined as a small boat kept on a ship for use in an emergency. This same philosophy is being used for the conservation of our unique and threatened species. While every effort is being made to safeguard the species on island, the Department of Conservation Services

has been actively seeking assistance from international partners to ensure that Bermuda will never lose its unique species to a manmade or natural disaster.

Working with our international partners, and at no cost to the Government I might add, we have sent representatives of our at risk species, such as the Killifish, Governor Laffan Fern, endemic snail and seeds of our endemic plants overseas for safe keeping, to institutions such as the Omaha Zoo, Durrell Wildlife Centre, Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, the Vienna Zoological Society, the London Zoological Society and most recently Chester Zoo in the U.K.

Mr. Speaker,

This precautionary approach has already proven extremely beneficial. The Killifish in Vienna are thriving, and we are learning a lot about their life cycle. Kew has asked permission for other countries to use some of the seeds collected from our rare plants in the hopes of establishing colonies in other parts of the world.

Unfortunately, after an extensive search, it appears that we have lost the five endemic snail species we once had. We believe our snails have fallen victim to two introduced predatory snails and a flatworm. As such the only population of one type of Bermuda snail now resides at the London Zoo, under the care of the London Zoological Society. In due course we are hoping to return a portion of the London snails to Bermuda and to re-establish them in parts of Bermuda that are free of these predators.

Mr. Speaker,

The Bermuda Skink is an example of another endemic species under extreme threat. Records show that while it evolved on Bermuda for a million years into the unique species it is today, it is now being impacted by loss of habitat, the introduction of pests, competition from other lizard species, predatory birds, cats, as well as thrown away bottles, which act as deadly traps. Due to these pressures, the skink's numbers have plummeted and the island's population has been pushed to the edge of extinction. Currently it is one of the rarest lizards in the world.

The Bermuda Skink is an iconic species for Bermuda and it is our duty to actively preserve and recover it as best we can. Therefore, I am pleased to announce that through the efforts of the Department of Conservation Services, the Bermuda Zoological Society and our new friends at Chester Zoo, there is new hope for the island's only endemic lizard.

Mr. Speaker,

This month, a team led by Dr. Gerardo Garcia from Chester Zoo, in partnership with the Department of Conservation Services, transported 12 skinks overseas in order to start a captive breeding program. I am pleased to report that our emigrants are all doing well and apparently enjoying relative luxury in their new home.

The ultimate aim will be to not only have a safeguarded population overseas but also to develop a recovery toolkit on how to best rear these unique creatures in captivity using the expertise of the Lower Vertebrate and Invertebrate Department of Chester Zoo.

Mr. Speaker,

Dr. Garcia and his team will recreate the climate of Bermuda using temperature data taken from the islands where the skinks were found, together with other elements of the lizards' natural surroundings, such as rock, coral and forest substrates, to create the optimal breeding conditions. The zoo's veterinary experts will also research the skinks' biology, carrying out ultrasounds in an effort to understand them better. Experiments will also be conducted on microchipping techniques, so ultimately, conservationists will be able to track skinks in the wild to determine how long they live and how far they travel.

Mr. Speaker,

The length of time required to develop the toolkit will depend on the skinks themselves - the six pairs at Chester Zoo are entering the breeding season - but it may be another year before they successfully breed and before the complete guide is ready. The results will then be shared with Bermuda's Department of Conservation Services and its support charity the Bermuda Zoological Society.

Mr. Speaker,

On behalf of the Bermuda Government, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to not only Chester Zoo and Dr. Garcia, but also to all our overseas partners who are providing us the use of their facilities, their expertise and advice to ensure that our most threatened species survive for future generations to experience and enjoy.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.