



## Union Island Environmental Attackers (UIEA): Community-based conservation and protection of the last remaining habitat for Critically Endangered Union Island Gecko: a Caribbean flagship species

### UIEA

CASE STUDY #5: Innovation and best practices in marine and coastal governance and management by civil society in the Caribbean

### Introduction

Local communities are at the frontline of protecting threatened species and their habitats. However, for them to play a role in conservation, not only must they understand the importance of doing so, they must see how it can benefit them. Within six years of first being "discovered" and described in the scientific literature in 2005, the Union Island gecko (*Gonatodes daudini*) was added to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and classified as Critically Endangered. Thanks to its unusual and attractive jewel-like markings, it is coveted by exotic pet collectors.

The entire population of this lizard is confined to a small habitat range of 50 hectares in the dry forest of Chatham Bay on Union Island, the most southerly island in the St. Vincent and the Grenadines archipelago.



A fully grown Union Island gecko measures just 3 cm, roughly the size of a paper clip.  
© Jeremy Holden / Fauna and Flora International (FFI)

This case study showcases the results of a small grant under the Caribbean Sea Innovation Fund (CarSIF) facility. The Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI) established the CarSIF facility to address priority needs and actions for marine and coastal resources governance and management in the Caribbean. The CarSIF small grants awarded between 2019 and 2020 are a key component of the regional project 'Powering Innovations in Civil Society and Enterprises for Sustainability in the Caribbean (PISCES).

PISCES is funded by the European Union EuropeAid programme and implemented over three years from 2017 to 2020. PISCES is being implemented by CANARI, in partnership with the Caribbean Coastal Area Management Foundation (C-CAM), the Caribbean Network of Fisherfolk Organisations (CNFO), the Environmental Awareness Group (EAG), and the Fondation pour la Protection de la Biodiversité Marine (FoProBiM), the Saint Lucia National Trust (SLNT) and Sustainable Grenadines Inc (SusGren). PISCES targeted ten countries: Antigua and Barbuda; The Bahamas; Dominica; Grenada; Haiti; Jamaica; Saint Kitts and Nevis; Saint Lucia; Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; and Trinidad and Tobago.

The density of geckos has declined considerably in recent years and as much as 80 per cent between 2010 and 2018. The main reason for the dwindling population is the removal of individuals by collectors for the international pet trade: a single gecko can fetch as much as US\$800. In addition to being exploited in this way, the geckos are threatened by the loss of their habitat as local and international collectors damage the forest while searching for them. Protecting the Union Island gecko's habitat range is imperative for the survival of this jewel of an endemic species, which now bears the unfortunate distinction of being the most trafficked Caribbean reptile.

Leading the habitat protection charge within the local community is Union Island Environmental Attackers (UIEA). This volunteer group has been active on Union Island since 1999, gathering community momentum behind environmental protection and community improvement. UIEA encourages and empowers the general public to protect the natural environment to provide livelihoods for Union Island's 3,500 inhabitants and attract tourists.

In 2016, UIEA developed the Union Island Gecko Conservation Action Plan in association with community members and other stakeholders. This plan provides a framework for saving the Critically Endangered Union Island gecko and includes an education and community outreach programme that targets schools and the wider community. UIEA was awarded a Caribbean Sea Innovation Fund (CarSIF) grant to carry out activities between October 2019 to May 2020 in support of outreach and communication efforts under the Action Plan.

## Project Description

The project sought to increase knowledge about the Union Island gecko and its habitat and foster positive attitudes towards its conservation and that of the Chatham Bay forest and Union Island's biodiversity. The main activities were:

- ***A two-day educational and community outreach programme for schools and community members that included talks, environmental interpretation, and storytelling.*** In addition to focussing on the gecko and its habitat, topics included climate change and biodiversity conservation. Community members were also introduced to opportunities for eco-guiding.



*The island-wide coastal clean-up competition took place over two weeks between November and December 2019. © UIEA*

- ***A two-week island-wide coastal clean-up competition that targeted the Union Island gecko's habitat in Chatham Bay and other coastal areas on Union Island.*** The removal of litter and debris from 11 coastal areas across the island was accompanied by tree planting. Residents who took part in the clean-up were told how their actions would help protect the Union Island gecko and about the importance of marine and coastal biodiversity and its conservation. The competition was open to villages, uniformed groups, clubs, schools, church groups and even family groupings. In addition to overall prizes for the cleanest areas, prizes were offered in categories such as the greenest area, most garbage collected, and the number of trees planted.

- **Technology-based** knowledge sharing through the upgraded UIEA website, which now includes updated information on the Union Island gecko, biodiversity conservation, and coastal protection. As part of the workshop programme, participants had to log in on the UIEA website to access course training materials.

The project targeted Union Island residents, including adults, youth aged 10 - 18 years, fisherfolk, water taxi operators and other marine users.

## Results

The multi-session workshop programme successfully increased awareness of the gecko and, together with the community clean-up competition, has helped change attitudes to littering and illegal poaching. Following the two-day programme, which reached 160 people directly, some 30 Union Island residents indicated an interest in becoming certified eco-guides and requested formal tour guide training from the Ministry of Tourism.

The coastal clean-up was met with enthusiasm island-wide. UIEA initially planned to hold the clean-up in five locations, but thanks to local demand, it staged the clean-up in 11 sites where 120 people got involved. A lasting effect of the clean-up is less litter in the Chatham Bay area; residents continue to be actively engaged in keeping coastal areas near their communities clean. Union Island residents are looking forward to another island-wide clean-up competition to showcase which village or coastline area is the cleanest. UIEA's awareness efforts also energised the wardens, who now carry out more daily patrols of Chatham Bay and report a decrease in poaching.



*The Valley Gang (left) and the Union Island Police Youth Club (right), first and second place winners in the island-wide coastal clean-up competition. The overall first, second and third place winners received cash prizes. © UIEA*

The upgraded UIEA website is now a source of updated information for locals and foreigners alike. As workshop participants were directed to the website as part of the programme, a cadre of Union Island residents is aware of the website and what it has to offer.

## Good practice

**Community outreach and communication** were at the core of this CarSIF-funded project. UIEA used a range of community outreach approaches, techniques and activities for different purposes with good effect.

- **Outreach to inform:** People can't take part in or support what they don't know about. At the start of the project, a team from the St. Vincent and the Grenadines Forestry Department worked alongside

the Chatham Bay wardens going door-to-door to residences and business places to let people know about the project and why it was being done. UIEA credits the project's success to this early direct engagement to get the word out about the project. Even though UIEA also used the mass media for publicity, face-to-face engagement tapped into community networks and laid a foundation for other messaging.

- **Outreach to engage:** Getting people involved in an initiative goes beyond providing basic information, as UIEA discovered. Before coming on board, people wanted to know why UIEA was “protecting a lizard”, so the project team’s messaging from the very start also included information about how protecting the gecko could benefit them and their families.
- **From information to action:** One of the goals of conservation education is creating connections with nature that prompt people to take action. But often, information alone is not enough to do this. Experiences that give people context and allow them to see the issue first-hand often lead to a deeper appreciation and a stronger commitment to change, especially where behaviour modification is needed. UIEA used the coastal clean-up as a mechanism for moving from information to action. By making it a competition, UIEA appealed to people’s competitive nature and provided incentives for participation. The coastal clean-up also provided UIEA with an opportunity to educate about the importance of biodiversity and the conservation and protection of the gecko and its habitat.
- **Partnerships for implementation:** Partnerships also proved to be a success factor in executing this project, with partners bringing complementary skills and resources to the table. The collaboration with the Forestry Department was helpful in stakeholder engagement to raise awareness about the project. The participation of forestry officers created a buzz around the project, particularly among school students. Radio Grenadines proved an instrumental partner in providing pro bono advertising for the coastal clean-up competition, and Sustainable Grenadines Inc. provided invaluable support through the use of equipment and facilities. These contributions helped UIEA leverage additional human and financial resources for the project.



Union Island  
Environmental Attackers

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