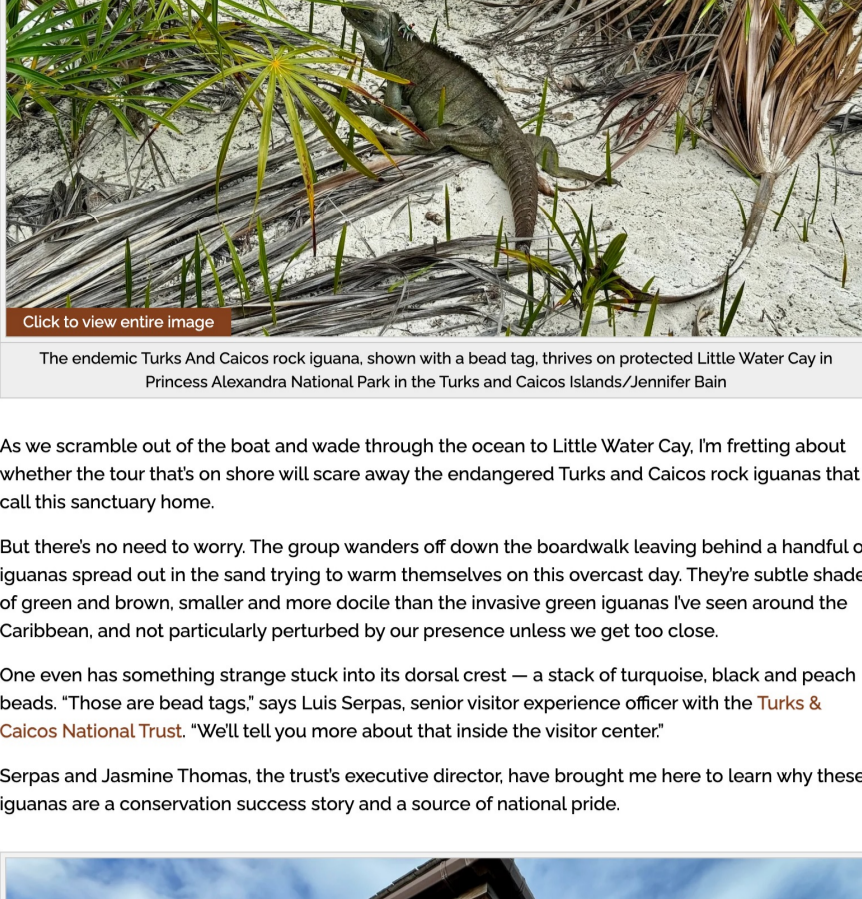


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Protecting Endangered Rock Iguanas In The Turks And Caicos Islands

By Jennifer Bain
March 13, 2026



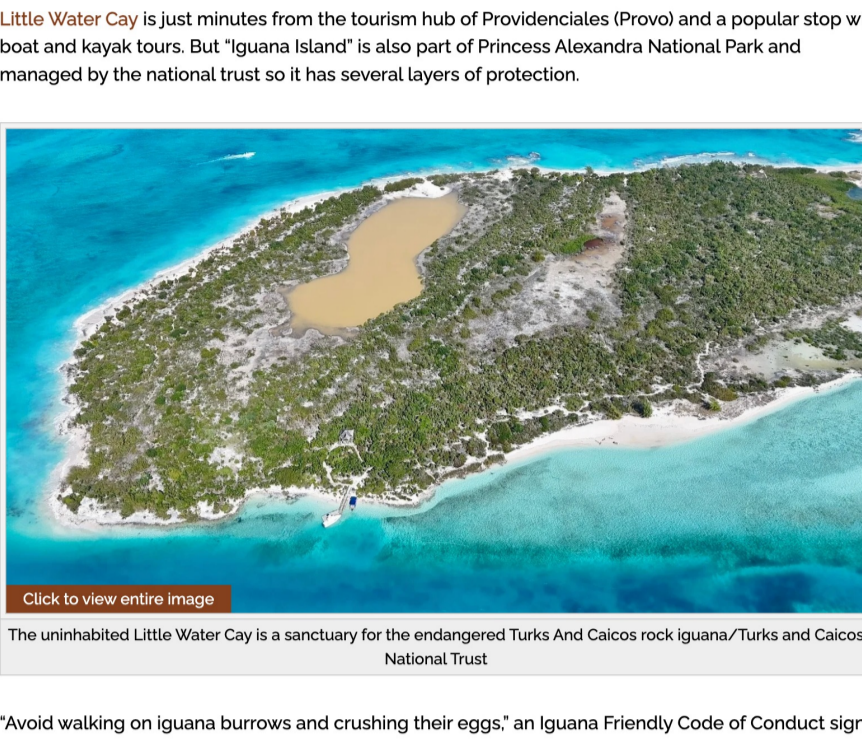
The endemic Turks And Caicos rock iguana, shown with a bead tag thrives on protected Little Water Cay in Princess Alexandra National Park in the Turks and Caicos Islands./Jennifer Bain

As we scramble out of the boat and wade through the ocean to Little Water Cay, I'm fretting about whether the tour that's on shore will scare away the endangered Turks and Caicos rock iguanas that call this sanctuary home.

But there's no need to worry. The group wanders off down the boardwalk leaving behind a handful of iguanas spread out in the sand trying to warm themselves on this overcast day. They're subtle shades of green and brown, smaller and more docile than the invasive green iguanas I've seen around the Caribbean, and not particularly perturbed by our presence unless we get too close.

One even has something strange stuck into its dorsal crest — a stack of turquoise, black and peach beads. "Those are bead tags," says Luis Serpas, senior visitor experience officer with the Turks & Caicos National Trust. "We'll tell you more about that inside the visitor center."

Serpas and Jasmine Thomas, the trust's executive director, have brought me here to learn why these iguanas are a conservation success story and a source of national pride.

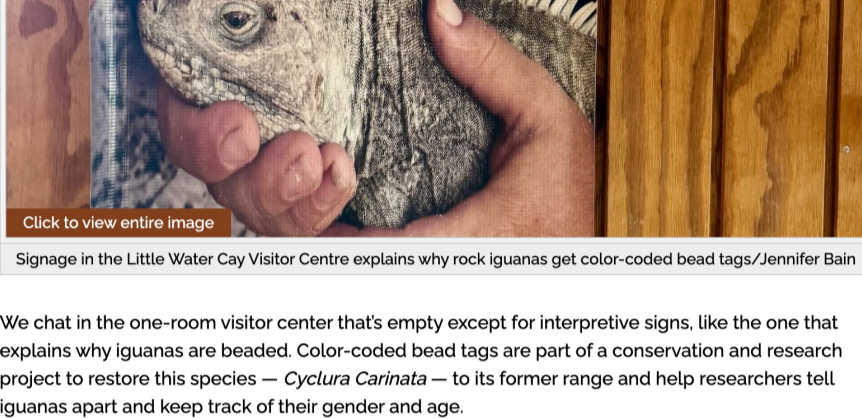


The Turks and Caicos National Trust's senior visitor experience officer Luis Serpas and executive director Jasmine Thomas stand outside the Little Water Cay Visitor Centre./Jennifer Bain

Once critically endangered, the rock iguanas that are endemic to the Turks and Caicos Islands (and one spot nearby in the Bahamas) have rebounded enough for the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species to downlist them to endangered status.

There are about 30,000 left and they occupy less than 10 per cent of their historic range. The biggest population is on the private and remote Ambergris Cay. The most accessible population is here where about 3,200 live on this uninhabited and low-elevation island formed on a coral reef.

Little Water Cay is just minutes from the tourism hub of Providenciales (Provo) and a popular stop with boat and kayak tours. But "iguana island" is also part of Princess Alexandra National Park and managed by the national trust so it has several layers of protection.



The uninhabited Little Water Cay is a sanctuary for the endangered Turks And Caicos rock iguana./Turks and Caicos National Trust

"Avoid walking on iguana burrows and crushing their eggs," an Iguana Friendly Code of Conduct sign warns, advising people to stay on boardwalks and pathways. "Do not harass or chase the iguanas and keep noise to a minimum. We know that stress causes them to live shorter lives."

Little Water Cay has been closed for repairs for several years but tours still come without paying admission since there aren't any enforcement rangers. That should end when the island reopens with a digitized payment system, repaired dock and boardwalks, and the option of national trust-led tours.

"I really want to help us with our growth now in bringing in better tours that wouldn't just be walking and just seeing the iguanas in that aspect. But understanding the research work that we're doing simultaneously and the real importance behind all of what we've been doing," Serpas explains.

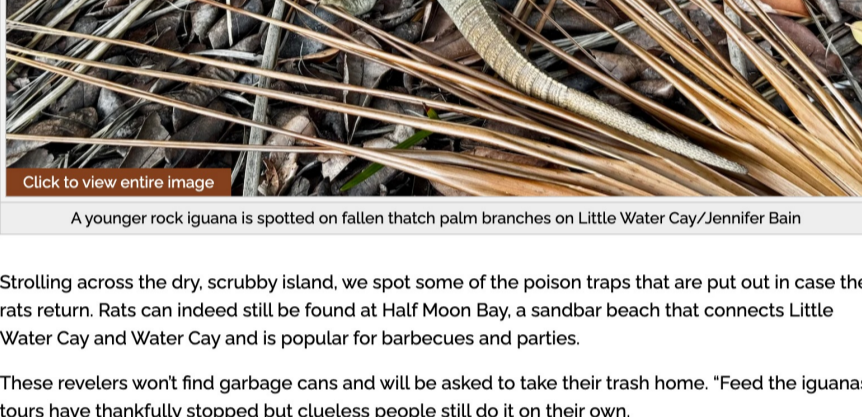


Signage in the Little Water Cay Visitor Centre explains why rock iguanas get color-coded bead tags./Jennifer Bain

We chat in the one-room visitor center that's empty except for interpretive signs, like the one that explains why iguanas are beaded. Color-coded bead tags are part of a conservation and research project to restore this species — *Cyclura Carinata* — to its former range and help researchers tell iguanas apart and keep track of their gender and age.

More than \$2 million has been spent on iguana conservation across this British Overseas Territory. Here at Little Water Cay — 116.2 acres of Crown Land with 7.2 acres of pond habitat with good birdwatching — the trust has a 99-year lease that runs until 2099.

Iguanas face multiple threats. Dogs and cats have pushed them off populated islands. Rats and feral cats have found them on unpopulated cays. With climate change will come flooding, erosion, dwindling food supplies and loss of habitat through sea level rise. Invasive green iguanas — identified by unique black rings on their tails — are a newer problem.

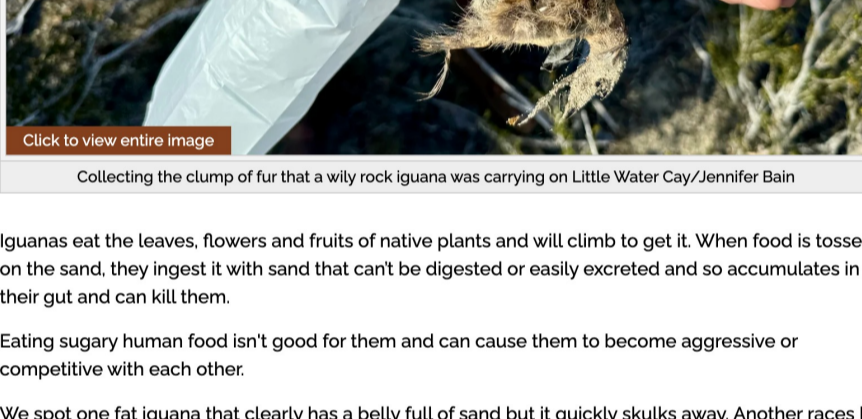


Iguanas burrow separate dens for themselves and for hatching their eggs./Jennifer Bain

The iguanas have attracted \$2.4 million in grants for projects like "Saving the Iguana Islands of Turks and Caicos" and "Strengthening Biosecurity to Protect Turks & Caicos' Iguana Islands," both by Darwin Plus, a UK government grants scheme for environmental projects.

The San Diego Zoo's population sustainability scientist Glenn Gerber, working with the trust, has eradicated rats from Little Water Cay that eat iguana eggs and even attack iguanas.

"Iguanas are very docile creatures as you can see from when we walked in — they don't mean any harm to anybody," says Serpas, whose work here dates back to 2017 when he started as a volunteer. "They just want to enjoy the sun and be around. So a major issue was that they didn't really have a defence mechanism against the rats."

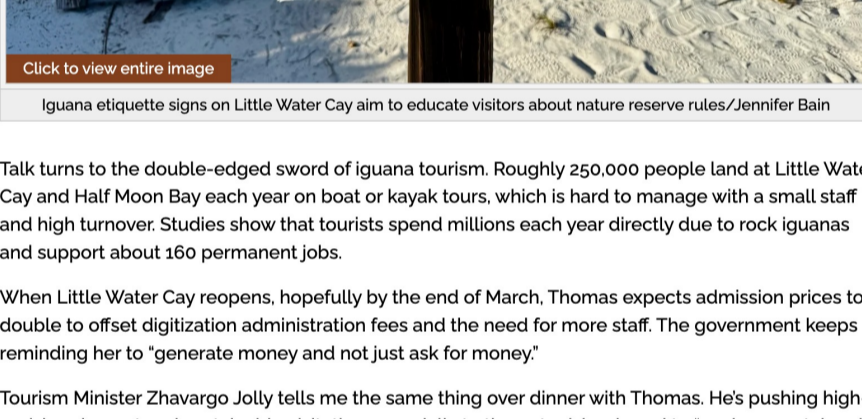


A younger rock iguana is spotted on fallen thatch palm branches on Little Water Cay./Jennifer Bain

Strolling across the dry, scrubby island, we spot some of the poison traps that are put out in case the rats return. Rats can indeed still be found at Half Moon Bay, a sandbar beach that connects Little Water Cay and Water Cay and is popular for barbecues and parties.

These revelers won't find garbage cans and will be asked to take their trash home. "Feed the iguanas" tours have thankfully stopped but clueless people still do it on their own.

This is illegal and carries \$5,000 fines or even jail time, a fact the trust has been sharing on social media. One post included a disturbing photo of an iguana with a bamboo skewer sticking out of its body because some fool likely used it to feed it fruit.

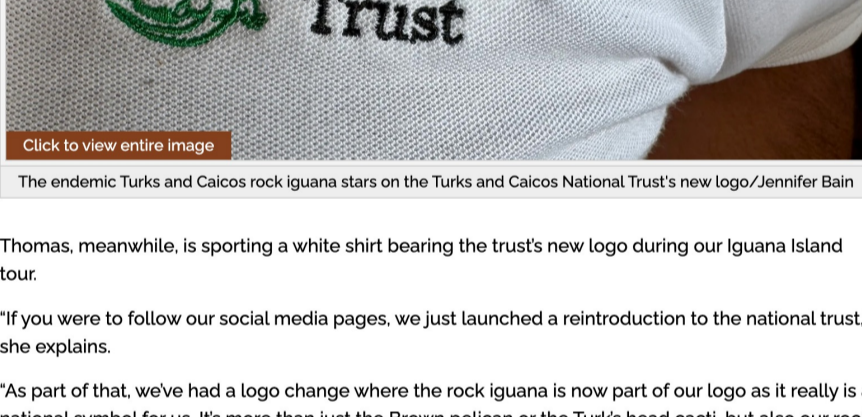


Collecting the clump of fur that a wily rock iguana was carrying on Little Water Cay./Jennifer Bain

Iguanas eat the leaves, flowers and fruits of native plants and will easily get it. When food is tossed on the sand, they ingest it with sand that can't be digested or climb to excrete it, so accumulates in their gut and can kill them.

Eating sugary human food isn't good for them and can cause them to become aggressive or competitive with each other.

We spot one fat iguana that clearly has a belly full of sand but it quickly skulks away. Another races by with something furry in its mouth, but when it drops it we bag it for identification.

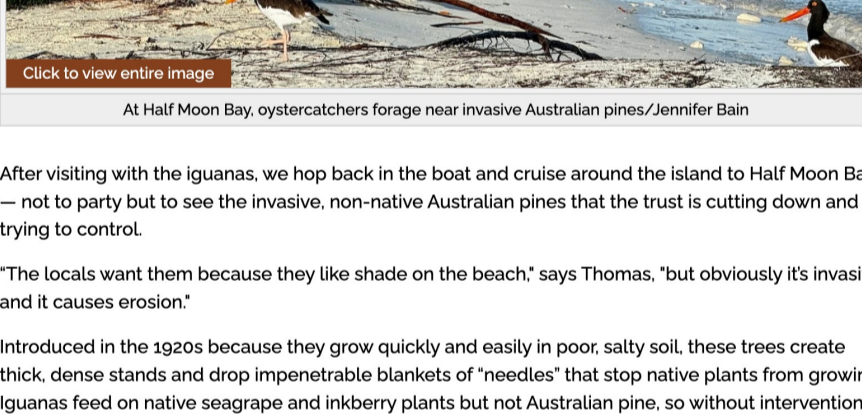


Iguana etiquette signs on Little Water Cay aim to educate visitors about nature reserve rules./Jennifer Bain

Talk turns to the double-edged sword of iguana tourism. Roughly 250,000 people land at Little Water Cay and Half Moon Bay each year on boat or kayak tours, which is hard to manage with a small staff and high turnover. Studies show that tourists spend millions each year directly due to rock iguanas and support about 160 permanent jobs.

When Little Water Cay reopens, hopefully by the end of March, Thomas expects admission prices to increase to offset digitization, administration fees and the need for more staff. The government keeps reminding her to "generate money and not just ask for money."

Tourism Minister Zhavango Jolly tells me the same thing over dinner with Thomas. He's pushing high-end, low-impact and sustainable visitation especially to the outer islands and to "environmental and cultural products, a lot of which is under the stewardship of Jasmine and the national trust."

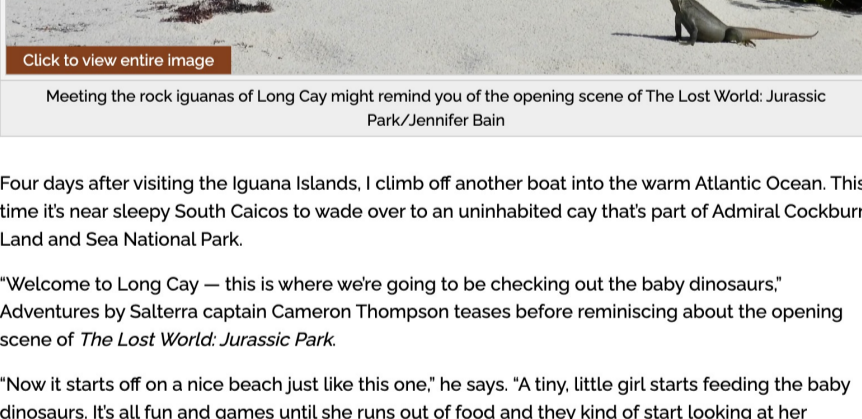


The endemic Turks and Caicos rock iguana stars on the Turks and Caicos National Trust's new logo./Jennifer Bain

Thomas, meanwhile, is sporting a white shirt bearing the trust's new logo during our Iguana Island tour.

"If you want to follow our social media pages, we just launched a reintroduction to the national trust," she explains.

"As part of that, we've had a logo change where the rock iguana is now part of our logo as it really is a national symbol for us. It's more than just the Brown pelican or the Turk's head cacti, but also our rock iguana because it's indigenous and only found here and nowhere else in the world."

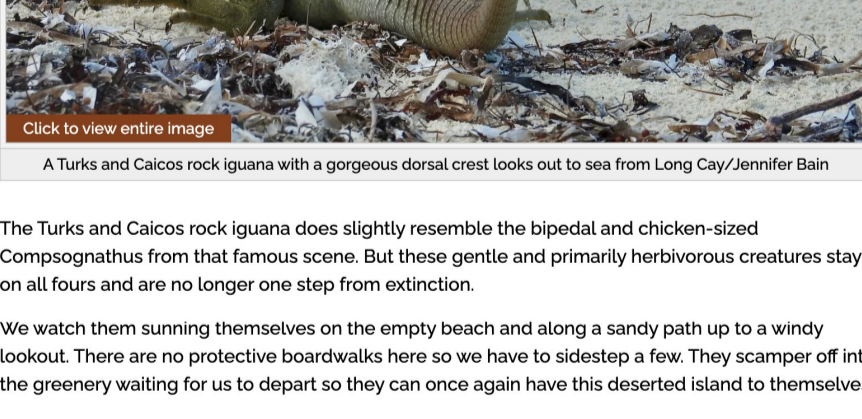


At Half Moon Bay, oystercatchers forage near invasive Australian pines./Jennifer Bain

After visiting with the iguanas, we hop back in the boat and cruise around the island to Half Moon Bay — not to party but to see the invasive, non-native Australian pines that the trust is cutting down and trying to control.

"The locals want them because they like shade on the beach," says Thomas, "but obviously it's invasive and it causes erosion."

Introduced in the 1920s because they grow quickly and easily in poor, salty soil, these trees create thick, dense stands and drop impenetrable blankets of "needles" that stop native plants from growing. Iguanas feed on native seagrass and inkberry plants but not Australian pine, so without intervention this invader will continue to dominate and make life harder for hungry iguanas.

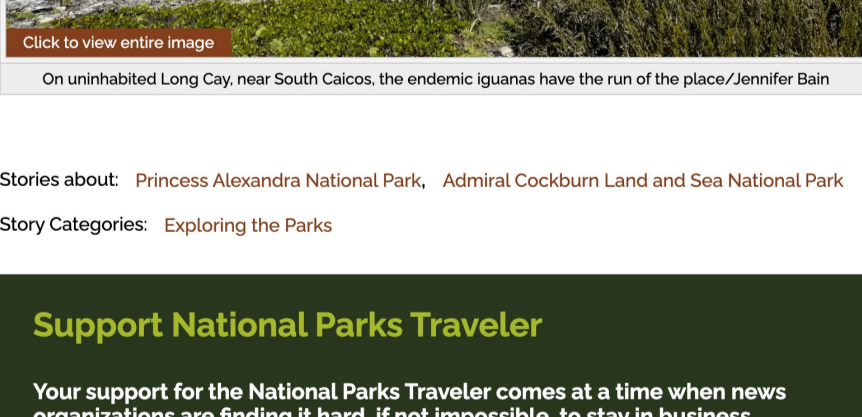


Meeting the rock iguanas of Long Cay might remind you of the opening scene of The Lost World: Jurassic Park./Jennifer Bain

Four days after visiting the Iguana Islands, I climb off an uninhabited boat into the warm Atlantic Ocean. This time I wear sleepy South Caicos to wade over to another boat that's part of Admiral Cockburn National Park Land and Sea National Park.

"Welcome to Long Cay — this is where we're going to be checking out the baby dinosaurs." Adventures by Salterra captain Cameron Thompson teases before reminiscing about the opening scene of *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*.

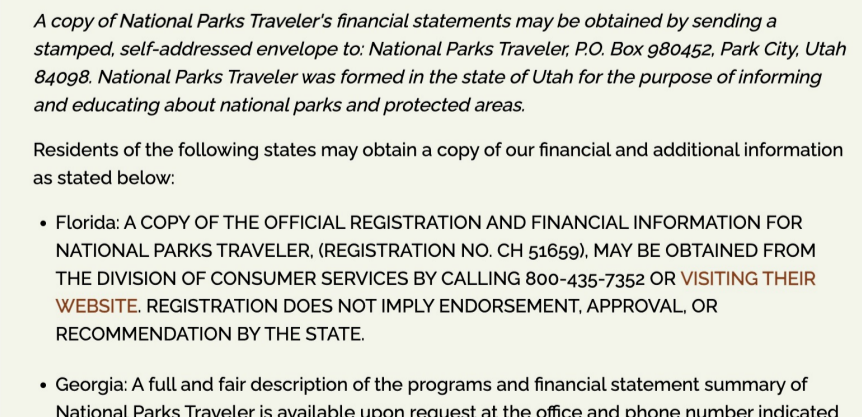
"Now it starts off on a nice beach just like this one," he says. "A tiny, little girl starts feeding the baby dinosaurs. It's all fun and games until she runs out of food and they kind of start looking at her sideways. Luckily these guys are vegetarians for the most part, so we won't be facing that problem here."



A Turks and Caicos rock iguana with a gorgeous dorsal crest looks out to sea from Long Cay./Jennifer Bain

The Turks and Caicos rock iguana does slightly resemble the bipedal and chicken-sized *Compsognathus* from that famous scene. But these gentle and timidly herbivorous creatures stay on all fours and are no longer one step from extinction.

We watch them sunning themselves on the empty beach and along a sandy path up to a windy lookout. There are no protective boardwalks here so we have to sidestep a few. They scamper off into the greenery waiting for us to depart so they can once again have this deserted island to themselves.



On uninhabited Long Cay, near South Caicos, the endemic iguanas have the run of the place./Jennifer Bain

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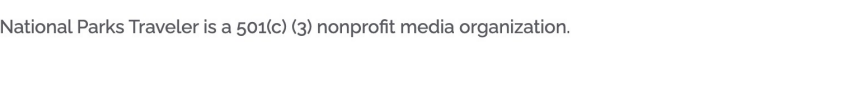
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