

Population Estimate, Habitat Associations, and Conservation of the St. Croix Ground Lizard *Ameiva polops* at Protestant Cay, United States Virgin Islands

ABSTRACT: The status of the endemic St. Croix Ground Lizard (*Ameiva polops*), listed by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service as an endangered species in 1977, has become precarious on Protestant Cay (1.2 ha), an islet in Christiansted Harbor just off the northeastern coast of St. Croix, US Virgin Islands. Surveys were conducted throughout Protestant Cay from April to June 2002 in 23 habitat sampling units composed mainly of landscaped areas. The maximum number from one of three replicated censuses within each unit was summed over all units to yield a probable minimum population estimate. Thirty *Ameiva polops* were present in 10 sampling units (dry forest, beach) which had a higher density of ground litter and taller shrubs than areas where lizards were absent. The total occupied area was 0.23 ha (one-fifth of Protestant Cay) and lizard density in this area was 128/ha (an average of 25/ha for the entire cay). The long-term decline (ca. 35 yr) of *A. polops* on Protestant Cay is associated with deleterious landscaping practices of the hotel, especially raking and removal of litter. A habitat conservation plan or safe harbor agreement for Protestant Cay, designated critical habitat under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, must be implemented to prevent extirpation of *A. polops* from one of only three islets where it still occurs.