

Environmental group petitions for protection for lizards found in V.I.

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Photo by RENATA PLATENBERG

One of the species of skinks the Center for Biological Diversity is trying to protect under federal law.

ST. THOMAS - The Center for Biological Diversity once again is asking for federal protection for rare species found in the Virgin Islands.

The nonprofit environmental group filed a formal petition Tuesday with the federal government seeking protection under the Endangered Species Act for nine newly identified skinks found only in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

A skink is a rare ground lizard, bronze in color, that looks like a snake with legs.

In the U.S. Virgin Islands, skinks are found mostly on the protected offshore islands and cays around St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix.

“Time is running out for these lizards,” center biologist and lawyer Collette Adkins Giese said. “The Caribbean is home to extremely rare animals found nowhere else in the world, but too many have already gone extinct. To save these skinks, we need to get them protected under the Endangered Species Act.”

The petition is the result of research done by Blair Hedges of Pennsylvania State University. Previously, it was assumed that all skinks found throughout the Caribbean were the same, or at least part of the same family of lizards.

University of the Virgin Islands professor Renata Platenberg worked with the Center for Biological Diversity to file the petition, because her specialty is Caribbean reptiles and amphibians, and she assisted Hedges in some of his research.

Platenberg was working at the V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources when Hedges came to do field research in the territory in 2004. He obtained DPNR permits to conduct his research on the government-owned cays, which are protected wildlife refuges.

When the study was published in 2012, it found each little island, or small groups of islands, actually have genetically different species of the skink.

Platenberg said the petition notes that some uncertainty about which species still exist must be researched further. She said if the skinks are listed under the Endangered Species Act, it would make federal funding for further research available.

“So, the petition is really a request for Fish and Wildlife to undertake the necessary studies to see if the species are warranted to be listed,” Platenberg said.

She said if further research confirms that each one of the islands is home to an individual species: “We could be looking at having a collection of the rarest lizards on the planet.”

All of the newly identified endemic Caribbean skinks are near extinction, or are already extinct, because of introduced predators, such as mongooses and cats, as well as large-scale habitat destruction for development and agriculture, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

“Skinks have a slow-moving curiosity and are not adapted to fast predators such as the

mongoose, introduced by humans,” Hedges said in a written statement. “The survival of these skinks depends on the special measures of protection that only the Endangered Species Act can provide.”

The Caribbean skinks included in the petition can grow to be about 8 inches long and are unique among reptiles in having reproductive systems similar to humans - including a placenta and live birth. They have cylindrical bodies, and most have ill-defined necks that, together with their sinuous movements and smooth, bronze-colored skin, make them look like stubby snakes, Giese said.

Four of the species listed in the petition are found in Puerto Rico and its adjacent islands Culebra, Mona Island and Monito Island.

The remaining five are found in the Virgin Islands.

The Greater St. Croix skink is found on St. Croix and Green Cay. The Lesser St. Croix skink is found on St. Croix. The Greater Virgin Islands skink is found on

St. John and St. Thomas. The Lesser Virgin Islands skink and the Virgin Islands bronze skink are found on St. Thomas, two adjacent islets and several British Virgin Islands.

“We understand a little bit about habitat requirements, but that’s about it,” Platenberg said. “We don’t know the distribution of these lizards. We don’t know how many of them there are.”