

The Iguana Rescue Dilemma

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All photographs by Carole Saucier except where indicated.

According to the Humane Society of the United States (2001), more than 3.9 million households in the U.S. keep one or more reptiles or amphibians as pets. Approximately 18% of these are Green Iguanas (720,000). Data collected between 1989 and 1997 indicate that an average of 381,000 Green Iguanas are imported each year, 566,000 in 1997 alone. Based solely on anecdotal evidence, many rescuers have long believed that as many as 90% of pet Green Iguanas die within a year. If more than half of the total pet iguana population is replaced each year, this tragic assumption is probably well-grounded in truth.

Properly tended, a Green Iguana can live for 20–30 years, but, undoubtedly, few reach such a

venerable age. Again, based on anecdotal evidence, I believe that only a tiny fraction of those Green Iguanas that manage to survive their first year in captivity actually live out their potential life spans in the hands of a single caretaker. What becomes of the rest of them? On a bad day, when I am inundated with phone calls and e-mail messages, I feel as if every last one of those survivors comes past my door.

Why do people give up iguanas?

Aside from the “my iguana has gotten too big” and the “I can’t provide my iguana with enough attention,” calls, most of the other inquiries I receive asking for help with Green Iguana rescues begin with, “I have an awkward



Bronte (formerly Emily) has been at the Iguana Sanctuary for the last five of his approximately 16 years.

and very unusual situation ...” While the situation may indeed be awkward for the person on the other end of the line, after many years of rescuing all manner of reptiles, the stories are all too predictable for me. In fact, if you list the principal characters involved, I can generally fill in the scenario with great accuracy.

We’re getting divorced and we need a home for the iguana.

I’m newly married and my spouse feels we need — (and the classic variation) I’ve been married for a year and my spouse feels we need ...

My son/daughter is leaving for college and we need ...

I’m moving and my new landlord insists that we find ...

Those that are my least favorites require immediate attention:

My tenant just moved out and left behind his iguana.

There’s an animal in the plum tree in my front yard. Can you come and get it?

Occasionally, I encounter a novel variation (I’ve just been evicted, my spouse has been incarcerated, I found this on the railroad tracks), but, ultimately, everyone wants help and they want it immediately. If I can’t take their animal right away, the iguana is likely to be released. A fortunate few are brought to me by Animal Control.

Boy or a Girl?

“The iguana is in good health — but I don’t know if it’s a boy or a girl.” Not surprisingly, those who cannot tell the difference between a male and



“It’s in pretty good shape.” Mina was actually all right — for an abandoned, stunted animal with only one dorsal spine that hadn’t rotted off, four digits that hadn’t been amputated by persistent constriction bands, an oozing infection in her upper chest and dewlap, and a couple of vertebral fractures.

a female iguana lack the wherewithal to judge the animal’s state of health. No, a hot rock and bowl of lettuce don’t cut it. Anyone with a truly healthy iguana knows that proper iguana nutrition is a four-letter word: W-O-R-K. Proper care requires a complex orchestration of planning, shopping, and preparation — and there aren’t any shortcuts.

Most of the iguanas that come to me (including those in “good health”) are in fact quite ill. I see all degrees of stunting, emaciation, deformity, and disease, most of them resulting from improper lighting or nutrition and the attendant stress. Those that are unadoptable and stay with me permanently are generally the most physically handicapped and ill-tempered, the “FLKs” and the “grumps.” “FLK” or “Funny-Looking-Kid” is a technical term that my husband learned in medical school to denote individuals with genetic aberrations leading to physical abnormalities. I also apply it to my animals with nutrition-related and congenital deformities.



Tatiana is the quintessential “Funny-Looking Kid.” Abandoned at a pet shop, she was purchased by another rescuer and eventually brought to me for further rehabilitation. Despite all the twists in her back and tail, she has no problem walking or climbing.



Odessa fits the profile of the large, aggressive female. Kept with other iguanas that match her in size, she has adapted well socially. Odessa was left behind when her owners moved out of their apartment; she was mistaken as a male by several other rescuers before she came to the Sanctuary.

The “grumps” are another fairly uniform group — they tend to be larger, older females that are a bit snappish and just won’t tolerate handling. These animals often are returned to me after an initial placement because they have been aggressive toward another iguana or people find themselves unable to relate to such an animal. From experience, I know that these “girls” will acclimate with time, but it’s a process that requires patience — sometimes years rather than months, and few people have the stamina to outlast their grumpiness.

The aggressive male iguana

Any reasonable program of behavior modification should begin with an assessment of how the world must appear from the subject’s perspective. My work rehabilitating iguanas began with this principle and the assumption that the problems of every aggressive iguana could be addressed.

I have been privileged to gain a wealth of insight into iguana behavior from animals with which I have worked over the years, but none challenged my initial beliefs until I met Kurosawa. Kurosawa was a 13-year-old male that had been raised by an adoring and attentive owner. He had been neutered at the age of seven when he began to be quite aggressive, and this seemed to calm him for a time. But, after he left 42 stitches in his owner’s arm, she was considerably relieved that I was willing to take on her beloved “bad boy.” Large but comparatively thin upon arrival, Kurosawa immediately challenged one of my other



Kurosawa during a visit from his previous owner, he had plumped up but had not yet become unmanageably aggressive. *Photograph by Ron Miyashiro.*

male Green Iguanas, lost the scrap and then settled in peacefully and began to eat — and eat and eat. Several months and several pounds later, Kurosawa was no longer peaceful. He was terrorizing every other iguana that crossed his path. Then he started to challenge me. Initially, his challenges were merely aggressive posturing and gaping, but this quickly progressed to a stage in which he began leaping across the room to try and attack me. My great experiment had failed and, in consultation with Kurosawa’s previous owner, we decided that the only reasonable choice was euthanasia. In retrospect, I am tempted to believe that he had simply been biding his time until he had become big enough to once again assert himself.

“My iguana needs a better home than I can provide.”

What are the options for placement? Very few. Zoos, nature centers, and animal welfare groups (HSUS, SPCA) constantly receive calls regarding unwanted pet iguanas, and they inevitably refer these callers to me or others among a handful of

individuals willing to deal with reptiles. All of us tend to be constantly overwhelmed and underfunded. Quite simply, no formal organization in this country is willing and able to cope with the ever-increasing number of unwanted pet reptiles.

“I’m going on vacation to Puerto Rico; couldn’t I just release my iguana there?” No!!!

Over the years, hundreds, likely thousands, of Green Iguanas have been released into the wild in the state of Florida and, in most instances, they are considered pests. An article in the Miami Herald once addressed the feral iguana problem in Florida, and my telephone number was listed as a contact for the International Iguana Society. Although I live in Connecticut, I was deluged with calls from irate Miami residents demanding that I come immediately to fetch Green Iguanas from their ornamental shrubbery (see also the article on p. 111).

Green Iguanas are not native to Florida and, in places like the Keys, they compete directly with native animals for a limited supply of vegetation. In the Lesser Antilles, Green Iguanas not only out-reproduce, but are known to have hybridized with native *Iguana delicatissima*. Puerto Rico is a different case still; native *Cyclura pinguis* was extirpated from the island long ago, and an introduced Green Iguana population has become firmly established. Could a captive-raised Green Iguana sur-

vive in the wild? Yes, obviously better than we might have imagined. Nevertheless, the argument remains that captive-held animals are likely to have an intestinal flora, other bacteria, and external or internal parasites that do not occur in the wild — and which may adversely affect wild populations of native animals with which they come into contact.

A frightening alternative

For a brief time, I was almost able to delude myself that the iguana rescue traffic was slowing a little. An occasional caller who, when told that I was unable to take an iguana immediately, would ask me if had heard anything about a place that I’ll call the “Alternative Reptile Institution” (ARI), which would supposedly accept any healthy, unwanted reptile for a fee. I really hadn’t heard anything at all about the ARI, until another rescuer asked me for assistance with an extensive rescue effort.

I discovered that this was where the remainder of the rescue traffic from my area had been diverted. Countless Green Iguanas had been taken in by the ARI. Some of the healthy ones were immediately resold, but countless others had died. Those that I was able to rescue had been housed together in a fairly large enclosure heated with a single inaccessible bulb, no functional ultraviolet light, dirty water, and no food. The largest iguana was perched in the only available basking spot and

would not allow any of the others to approach the food on those rare occasions when any was available. All of the animals were emaciated, dehydrated, covered with mites, and in various states of further disrepair. Some had open wounds and broken bones from recent injuries, others had burns and secondary infections.

Among the animals I was able to rescue from the ARI was a small Rhinoceros Iguana that had been there for about a year. She had been housed



This rescued Green Iguana had extensive burns across her pelvis and rear limbs. She was able to heal once her mite infestation had been cleared.



This animal had a broken rear limb with an open wound, likely caused by a bite from a cagemate. In the absence of any medical treatment, the wound developed a huge abscess.

with two large males and another small female of her species. I was immediately drawn to her because she came over to the glass and looked me straight in the eye — a prototypical FLK. She had a spinal scoliosis that left her looking like a reptilian version of a water buffalo. Her emaciated pelvis was jutting out prominently and, even through the glass, I could see the top of her head crawling with red mites. She also had the most awkward method of locomotion, with her legs sprawling uncontrollably in every direction. I was later informed that this type of movement is called “hypertonus,” and is comparable to the human condition called cerebral palsy.

The Rhino enclosure was large and had clearly been quite impressive when new, but it had not been maintained. The pool was empty and the substrate filthy. The temperature gradient was appropriate and even a bit of UV light intruded — but not in a location accessible to the animals. A

platter of dandelions, which a volunteer had just picked outside, was available, but the two small females were consistently kept from feeding by the two larger males.

I was permitted to take both females. The crooked one (Dolly) was considered too unattractive for display, while the other (Loretta) bore clear signs of a developing infection. Both animals, at eight years of age, were barely half the size of the six-year old Rhino female that has been with me since she was a hatchling. Dolly, who had apparently been left at the ARI only a year earlier, blossomed quickly once she had her own exclusive basking spot and a “bottomless” bowl of nutritious food. Although her movements remain awkward, she is able to climb “handicap ramps” and has been accepted by my other Rhinos.

Loretta’s recovery proved to be much more challenging. Blistering that had been present on her legs and trunk when I took her had erupted



Despite a crooked spine and extremely awkward locomotion, Dolly has been well-received by the other members of the Rhino "family."

into extensive lesions, which took a very long time to heal and left extensive scarring. Her growth and socialization have been much slower, but I suspect she also will integrate comfortably into the Rhino "family" in time.

The dilemma

So what's the dilemma? I truly love the work that I do and I find it enormously fulfilling, but it's also exhausting and unceasing. I've finally dragged myself through the endless process of becoming a not-for-profit organization and have been offered web space by a number of people. Yet, my greatest fear in creating a greater visibility for reptile rescue is that I will be completely inundated with even more unwanted animals without being able to obtain any help or funding.

In September, I was invited to attend an exposition for various animal rescue groups. I was eager to see how people working with other types of animals functioned. Unfortunately, I was obliged to back out of the engagement at the last minute when I discovered that I was required to pay a fee for a table as well as provide volunteers to assist in setting up. A fee? Most people giving up iguanas have little interest in providing for their care. Those who adopt animals will sometimes make a donation, but just as often need their resources to purchase equipment and food for their new charges. Volunteers? The occasional person has threatened to volunteer, but a closer look at the work reveals its generally unglamorous nature and

I've never had anyone show up and actually do any work. I thought it absurd to be asked to pay for the privilege of facing my usual dilemma.

So, how can the problem of unwanted Green Iguanas be properly addressed? Do we really need to ban the sale of these animals in pet shops? Require licensing? Ban ownership? Or perhaps insist that publicly supported animal welfare organizations take on the problem? Among the HSUS's stated charter purposes is to "protect all living things, especially animals." I was appalled to read their extensive documentation on the reptile pet trade and related "humane concerns," knowing that so little is being done by that organization. Even less impressive is the total lack of interest from a very large portion of the reptile pet industry, which directly benefits from the sale of these animals.

A glimmer of light

Another recent rescue involved two Green Iguanas abandoned on the doorstep of a cat shelter. The stunted and battered little animals were in no way unusual, but the response of the shelter manager was encouraging. She knew that she lacked the knowledge to care for the iguanas, yet she recognized that they deserved her attention, and she undertook the process of tracking down someone who did. Between the time that she called me in the morning and when we met at a parking lot that same afternoon, she had clearly done some research. As I was transferring the animals from her car to mine, she was answering questions for a curious passerby: "No, they don't make good pets. They'll burn themselves on a hot rock and they need a wide variety of vegetables and fruits."

I don't know what the long-term solution will be — but I invest a considerable portion of the time and effort left after taking care of animals to promote education on proper iguana husbandry. And at least some of the most critical information seems to be filtering through.

Reference

- Franke, J. and T.M. Telecky. 2001.** *Reptiles as Pets: An Examination of the Trade in Live Reptiles in the United States.* The Humane Society of the United States, Washington, DC.