

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

This year, the IUCN Iguana Specialist Group met in a geographic area other than the Caribbean for the first time, meeting in Suva, Fiji. The nation of Fiji is located in the South Pacific and is composed of several hundred islands, of which about a hundred are permanently inhabited. Two species of iguanas are native to these islands: the Pacific Banded Iguana, *Brachylophus fasciatus*, and the Fijian Crested Iguana, *Brachylophus vitiensis*. Both are endangered as a result of essentially the same factors faced by other insular species of iguanas. The Fijian species are spectacular animals, bright green with blue bands in the banded form and white bands in the crested form. Banded Iguanas are documented from 34 Fijian islands and the Crested Iguanas from only four islands.

The meeting in Suva consisted of two days of intense discussions and workshops. The Iguana Specialist Group, along with officials from the University of the South Pacific, The National Trust of Fiji Islands, and Kula Eco Park, collected preliminary information that will be used to produce a management plan for *Brachylophus vitiensis*.

In addition to the privilege of working on the Conservation & Management Plan for the Fijian Crested Iguanas, I felt honored to see them in their natural state. At 3:30 a.m. of the morning following the meeting, the group visited the island of Yadua and stayed in the village of Denimanu. We had to be accepted into the village as guests prior to visiting Yadua Taba, the home of the Crested Iguana. Once we were accepted as a group, each individual was adopted by a family from the village and we were set for an in-depth cultural experience.

The village has no electricity (other than a small gasoline generator supplying power for a few fluorescent lights) or running water. Most of the people live in grass huts, which also became our homes for a few days. All of our meals were prepared fresh, primarily from fish harvested from the offshore reef. The reef itself has been monitored for the past four years by a conservation group from the UK called Greenforce. Their study indicates that this is one of the few remaining pristine reefs in the world and that the harvest is sustainable. Without refrigeration, the people take only enough to supply their immediate needs.

Although a local Fijian language exists, most people speak English, especially the children, who attend school on the island until the eighth grade, and are then sent to the larger islands for further education if their parents are able to afford it. We were surprised to find no tables or chairs in the village; everyone sits on the floor (or ground) with their legs crossed. Hats and sunglasses are not permitted and, while alcohol is banned, smoking is not. Women wear calf-length skirts and men wear a Sulu (or sarong) during any important event, which seemed to occur daily. The featured social activity is centered around a drink called Kava, which is considered a sort of analgesic. Our group brought Kava root as a gift to the village. The root is pounded into a paste, which is then added to water. Even drinking Kava has rules; when it is offered and you wish to partake, simply clap your hands once, then proceed to drink the entire cup. After drinking, you hand the cup to the presenter and clap your hands three times. This gesture assures you of another round. If one leaves the Kava circle, one must touch the Kava bowl. Never



This photograph of Joe feeding an 800-lb crocodile earned him great respect from Fijian villagers. Photograph by Stephanie Saybolt.

point your legs (which are supposed to be crossed anyway) toward the Kava bowl. The drinking bowls were coconut-shell halves, some small and some quite large. Our scientific curiosity piqued, many in the group were prompted to partake of this unique cultural activity until the wee hours of the morning.

The villagers are quite proud of their native iguanas, although they are somewhat afraid of them, thinking their size (maximum SVL of 223 mm and weighing up to 404 g) rivals that of mythical dragons. Knowing this, Peter Harlow meant to ask the group to bring along photos of themselves with some of the huge reptiles some of us have the pleasure of handling on a daily basis. Unfortunately, he forgot. I had brought along some photos of different iguana species (*Cyclura*), but they lacked references to size. Included among my photos was one showing me feeding an 18-foot long crocodile that weighs 800 lbs! That photo earned me a great deal of attention — and a few more Kava bowls.

I thank Peter Harlow and the many Fijian naturalists, who are quite proud of their natural heritage and are willing to work to preserve it for future generations, for working tirelessly to make this meeting happen. To the people of Denimanu village, who most graciously invited us back for a future visit, be careful what you wish, it may come true — I will return...

Joseph Wasilewski