

IGUANA NEWSBRIEFS

Getting Rid of the Gasparilla Island Ctenosaurs: The Lizards Don't Want to Leave

A news item in the Boca Beacon, the Boca Grande (Gasparilla Island) weekly newspaper, reported that reptile rescuers Jamie and Mark Mitchell of Pinellas County came to the island with about a dozen volunteers in an attempt to round up as many of the introduced Spiny-tailed Iguanas (*Ctenosaura similis*) as they could capture on 17–18 December and attempt to domesticate them. The Mitchell's claimed to have screened 300 individuals who had applied to adopt the captured animals and had a further 2,000 adoption applications. On both days of the roundup, conditions were partly cloudy and daytime highs were around 70 °F. According to Sarah Watkins, Director of the Gasparilla Island Conservation and Improvement Association, with whom the rescuers had coordinated their efforts, the actual number of animals caught was "around six."

As well-intentioned as I'm sure the Mitchell's were, a brief study of some ctenosaur natural history might have served to increase their chances of capturing animals. These ctenosaurs are wily ground-dwellers. On Gasparilla, they have adapted to hiding (sometimes in Gopher Tortoise burrows) on days when temperatures are suboptimal. Each individual, regardless of age or gender, will usually occupy a clearly defined territory capable of providing adequate food resources, basking spots, lookout spots, and a snug retreat into which it can quickly escape at the first sign of danger. In short, these animals are not easy to catch even for professionals, much less a random collection of volunteers.

A second, equally relevant issue is the proposed plan to "domesticate" the animals once they were captured. In my experience with the captive care of six (of 17) different ctenosaur species, I would say that *Ctenosaura similis* is among the more difficult species to maintain. Some ctenosaurs, notably *C. acanthura* and *C. pectinata*, are social and well-adapted to living in groups. *Ctenosaura similis* is not the least bit social and individuals must



Ctenosaurs such as those established on Boca Grande (Gasparilla Island) are quite elusive. Photograph by John Binns.

be housed separately. These animals also are easily extremely wary and, if unable to retreat into a secure spot, they can become very aggressive, even to the point of being self-destructive. In essence, they make poor captives.

A number of years ago, I adopted six Gasparilla ctenosaurs trapped by a local rescuer. Even the very youngest of these animals, little more than a hatchling, had enormous difficulty adapting to captivity and I have had a 50% mortality rate.

Perhaps, as Ray Ashton (Commentary, p. 48) has suggested, this is one instance when we simply cannot correct the human folly that created the situation, and the best response is to stand back to observe and learn while nature takes her course.

—AJ Gutman

An Endoscope and Iguana Burrows

The International Reptile Conservation Foundation (IRCF) donated an endoscope with the intention that it be used to probe iguana burrows during surveys in the Dominican Republic (see IGUANA 11(1):8–14). Ernst Rupp, Grupo Jaragua, reports that they started out by introducing the endoscope

directly into burrows. Unfortunately, the tip of the endoscope gets clogged with dirt and dust and visibility is quickly reduced to zero. Maneuvering the cable in the fairly wide burrows also was difficult. In an effort to avoid those problems, they have experimented with inserting the endoscope into various flexible plastic hoses and tubes that can be maneuvered by pulling on one of two strings that are attached to the distal end. Flexible tubes seem to work best and they feel that they are making some progress.

They have experienced some success inserting the endoscope into the burrows of juvenile iguanas. Grupo Jaragua recently acquired a digital camera that can be attached to an adapter purchased for the endoscope, so they hope to be able to generate photographs in the near future.

Unfortunately, the 3-meter cable of the endoscope is not long enough to reach the end of the burrows of adult iguanas, which may be as long as 5 m. Larger endoscopes are too expensive at the moment and an additional problem would arise in regard to the light source (weight, batteries, power). In the interim, they will continue to work on improving their methods.



An endoscope of the type used to explore iguana burrows in the Dominican Republic (note, however, that the scope used in the field has a much longer optical cable than illustrated here).