

# A VISIT WITH MAO

WENDY TOWNSEND

In addition to excellent husbandry practiced at the Finca Cyclura, the keepers have a non-invasive policy regarding the animals. Iguanas that do not exhibit interest in contact with people are afforded the privacy and space they apparently prefer. Such lizards are not imposed upon or actively tamed. Given these conditions, individual iguanas may choose to be involved with human beings or not. The result is that some lizards are, or eventually become, interested in people and approach readily while others remain aloof or withdrawn. Regardless of direct involvement with people, the iguanas at the Finca are living to their potential with respect to growth, reproduction and social activity.

During my visit to Finca Cyclura, I had the pleasure of spending some time with Mao, a 30-35 year old male Rhinoceros iguana, *Cyclura cornuta*. At about 53 inches/134 cm., and 21 lbs./9.2 kg., Mao is a handsome and stately lizard whose individuality and character are immediately evident. He is “busy” with the responsibility of overseeing his 18' x 12' territory which also houses Gretta, a female *C. cornuta* and 3 green iguanas. Adjacent to Mao's territory is another that contains 4 iguanas, one of which is his son, Jomo. Mao is ever-aware of Jomo's proximity to the boundary

between territories and often “reminds” him to keep his distance.

When I entered Mao's home, he was not anxious as he noted my presence. I took a seat on a large rock near the back of the enclosure. Mao soon got around to investigating my white sneakers, presented himself for a rub on the head and back, and then climbed into my lap. When Mao angled his head to establish eye-contact, I felt I was receiving a gift of presence and communication.

Mao climbs into my lap and looks at my eyes for his own reasons which I cannot know fully. They are probably not related to hunger, defense of his home, or simple curiosity, for Mao knows about people already and clearly seeks interaction. Rather than tolerating me as a visitor, Mao extends himself, particularly with his eyes. I can assume little about his behavior, but I am moved by his look and would like to return it with something comparable. The desire for communication seems mutual.

My reaction to Mao is not entirely due to the fact that I love iguanas. I absolutely adore Goober, one of my own green iguanas of 7 years, for her moody, independent nature among other things. Familiarity, intelligence, and an absence of fear are usually present in her eyes. However, she neither

seeks nor extends anything that I am aware of with her look.

Then again, Goober is only 7 and less experienced than Mao, who is older and, dare I anthropomorphize, wiser!

