

# LIZARD LETTERS

## ***The Beast of Andros— My Two Years Cohabitation with a Cycluran Iguana.***

Dear Mr. Ehrig,

In issue Vol. 1, No. 6 of *Iguana Times* you published a short article about my Andros iguana.

This is the story of a sadly maltreated giant iguana, *Cyclura cychlura cychlura*, hereafter known as Pinkie. He was named for his pink head and was discovered languishing in a zoo on the Isle of Wight, England. To my knowledge, this is one of only two adult specimens in captivity in Europe. There was a specimen in a zoo in Germany, now deceased, and the one color photograph that was taken of it appears in quite a few publications.

I had been keeping *I. iguana* and one *C. cornuta* for about seven years and was always on the lookout for maltreated specimens. One weekend around Christmas 1985 I happened to visit a “zoo/adventure park” in southern England, closed for the winter, as I’d heard they had a reptile house with a large iguana. I was not prepared for what I found. There, in a large cage with three Galapagos tortoises, was the most enormous and magnificent iguana I had ever seen. With the build of a rhino iguana but minus the horns, with a mottled black body and a pinkish-white head, with deep red sclera in the eyes, and nodding furiously at me, this stocky creature backed away from the plate glass and kept his gaze on me. The unfortunate zookeeper, a zoologist of note in southern England, hated his job in this squalid zoo. He told me that the actual owner lived in London and that he couldn’t look after the animal anymore; after keeping it in a greenhouse for twelve years he gave it to the zoo. It had been “misappropriated” from Andros Island, Bahamas, and came to London “in somebody’s pocket.” Admittedly it had plenty of space, but it appeared to be sick. I was upset.

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I told my friend the zookeeper that I would like him to contact the owner of the iguana and the zoo owner for permission to take the iguana to an expert vet in London and afterwards to take it home with me to nurse it. Permission was obtained and I came with a car and we put Pinkie into a large canvas sack with a hot water bottle, and drove to London.

The vet stared aghast at Pinkie. “This is the first time I’ve ever seen such an iguana” he exclaimed, “but I’m afraid it’s very sick. You must give him medicine twice a day.” Easier said than done. Here was an iguana that had a bad temper, had always been kept alone in captivity, had never been a pet and had certainly never been petted. His teeth were razor sharp and sick though he was, he was extremely strong. Humans were alien to him and he feared them. He weighed

over twenty pounds and was three feet nine inches long without the end of his tail. He was angry; and he constantly nodded at everyone.

I got him to my apartment and put him into a cage 6' x 6' x 8' high, with rocks under a basking light, and central heating. He sniffed around the cage, ignored the cabbage leaves, and lay down with his arms folded to his body. He slept until the next day.

Now came the hard part – administering the medicine. The vet had decided on using tetracycline. I had to call in my friend Glenn from next door to help me. If the beastie was going to hate anyone, I didn’t want it to be me. Glenn wore his motorcycle gloves and picked the animal up but it proved too strong for him and wriggled too much. He then sat straddled on the floor, his bottom on the floor with the tail underneath, his knees clamped either side of the head, and without the need to hold the mouth open because the animal was hissing, I squirted the white liquid into the mouth with a horse syringe! I had to be careful to aim for the back of the mouth as the epiglottis of an iguana is situated on the tongue, and in an angry animal is erect and open. I could see air bubbles emanating from it.

For good measure, I also gave him three cod-liver oil tablets, one beta-carotene and two of calcium carbonate. I knew there would not be much opportunity to do this.

In the weeks to come this whole operation was repeated once or twice per day, according to the good humor of the beast and Glenn's work schedule. Pinkie did not eat. All these maneuvers probably saved his life. He would have had no chance in the zoo.

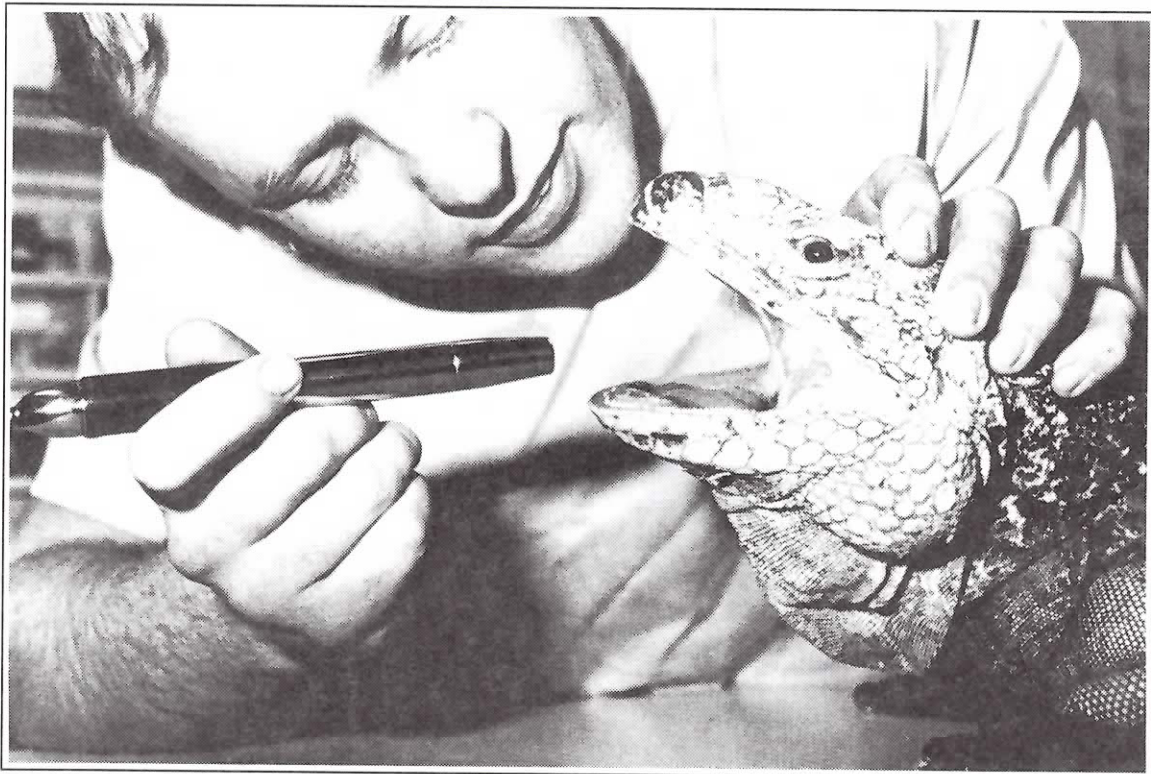
Time passed and Pinkie began to eat. He ate a lot of greens: cabbage, lettuce, spinach, chard, parsley, celery tops, dandelions, rose petals, bananas, oranges, apricots, squash, zucchini, cucumbers, red and green peppers, cauliflower and broccoli. He ate premium cat food, chicken and tuna fish. The canned cat food in England contains vitamin D<sub>3</sub> and is sterilized. All this was supplemented with D<sub>3</sub>/Calcium drops obtained from the pharmacy. He was also given Vionate® the mineral and vitamin supplement used by the London Zoo for all its snakes and lizards.

This was when Pinkie discovered the delights of freedom – a whole room to himself and soon to come, an entire apartment? I left his cage door open and he would return to it to go to the toilet and to sleep inside

an upturned cardboard box which had a hole cut out at one end. He developed a routine by which he would wake up and bask under the cage light for an hour or so, move to another part of the cage to eat, and then nose open the door of the cage to wander around the room. He would end up on the couch and go to sleep. Upon waking, he would bask again in the cage, and then wander freely around the apartment. I had two Siamese cats, and they would retreat to some high spot and stare helplessly at this new king of their realm. The cats never went out and resented the intrusion, but the cats and lizard never crossed paths. All this time, Pinkie would never let me touch him.

I had adopted the attitude that in order to tame him I must let him be until *he* became curious about *me*, in other words let him tame himself. He would do what other iguanas before him had done in my home. He would crawl over me, he would lick me, but *never* was I allowed to touch him. I tried twice and nearly lost a finger each time. Admittedly, when he bit me he immediately opened his mouth again to let my finger go. He could have severed it completely if he desired. I was astonished at the ease with which my finger tore open on his teeth.

*Continued on next page...*



Pinkie at the doctor. Photograph: John Bendon

*Lizard Letters continued...*

There was one extraordinary incident that occurred. One night he was basking in the cage; I was ready for bed. I turned out his light. I turned out my light. I was sleeping on the couch in the living room as the bedroom was full of iguanas. I was dozing off to sleep and the cage door creaked open. I heard Pinkie padding across the carpet. I thought he was going to find a quiet corner to sleep. He nosed his way into bed with me! I was half asleep and forgot about it and when I awoke in the morning there he was, head on my leg, arms folded by his side. I had to ease myself out on to the floor, picked him up before he woke and put him back in the cage. He repeated this behavior quite a few times.

Pinkie began to take over the whole house. He ended up preferring the kitchen as the sunlight hit the floor through the window most of the day. I opened the kitchen door so that the natural sunlight would come in – I hadn't reckoned that a twenty pound iguana could jump very much. Jump he did, out on to the fire escape, up the trellis and onto the sloping roof. I couldn't get him back, but I watched in horror as he began slipping backwards, his stumpy claws drawing white lines-on the grey English slate. I had to make a split-second decision: do I grab him as he falls backward and get my arm bitten, or do I hold a large blanket and let him drop into it? He slipped too quickly for any decision and I grabbed him by neck and tail and very quickly shoved him back into the kitchen. After that I put a plastic grill over the opening and let it suffice. He snorted and nodded furiously at me all that day. I decided that the time had come for me to try and touch him.

I spent hours and hours trying to get near him. Eventually, he allowed me to stroke the back of his neck and to squeeze his jowls. We finally became friends.

I had a basking cage made for him for the garden. He got used to going out there and even began waiting by the door, at the same time each day. I tied a soft rope around his middle, immediately above the back legs, (in case he ran off) and he would go down the few steps with me and into the cage in the garden.

I added years to his life when I took him from that zoo, and I have not heard of any other person who has lived in such close proximity with Andros iguana, *C. cyclura*. I made copious notes, drawings and photographs and discovered what I believe were unknown facts about these giant creatures, such as their attempts to clean their teeth with their tongues for long peri-

ods after eating, and the way this one intimately examined his back feet.

I do know that iguanas in general are a lot more intelligent than people realize, and communication between iguana and man is sometimes very wonderful, like a boy in a fairy tale who talks to a dragon.

One day, after Pinkie had done his business, I noticed spots of blood in the urine. I took him to my reptile vet. Three weeks later the great beast, my friend, died. The autopsy showed a kidney tumor and other irregularities. The animal is now preserved in alcohol in a large jar in the Natural History Museum in London. It is the only specimen the museum has ever had. To this day I have wonderful memories of my time spent with this beast of Andros and I feel that however much I did for him, he gave me much more than I ever gave him. Rest in peace, my Caribbean friend...

*John Bendon*  
*August 1993 / South of France.*



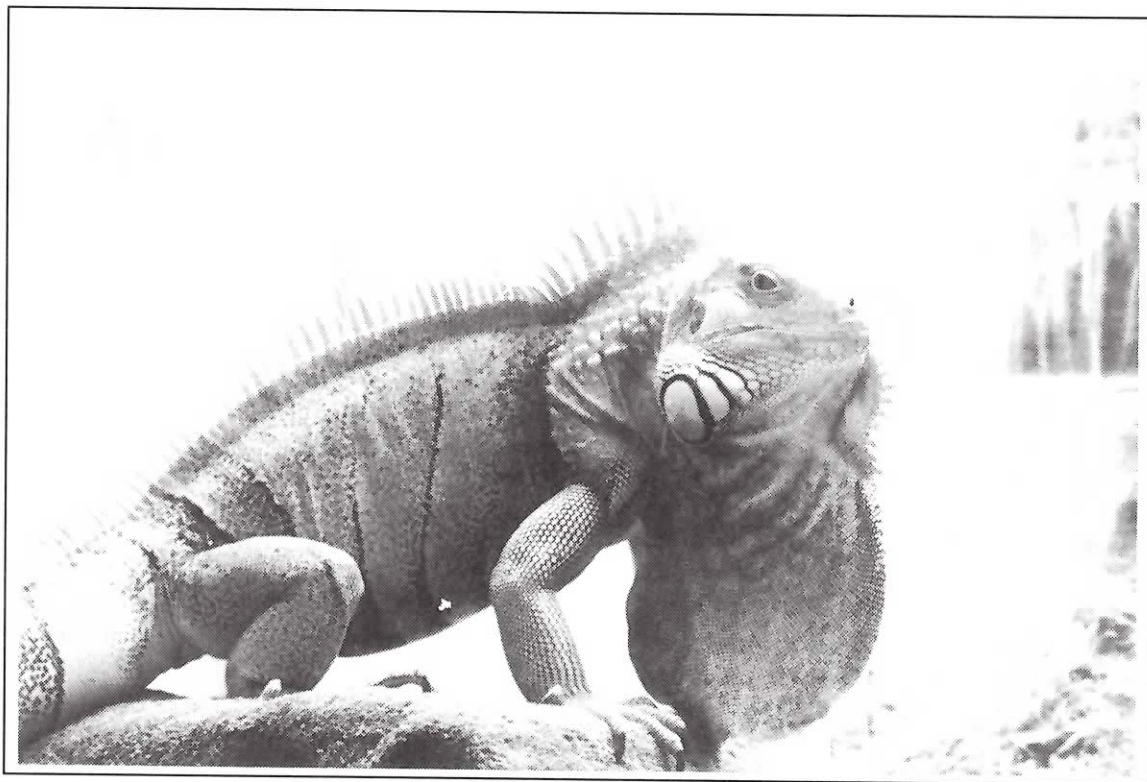
**Dear Editor:**

I am writing to tell you about the highly successful Iguana Fair and Clinic presented by the Fairbanks, Alaska Herpetocultural Society. The Fair was held Saturday, October 16th at the Noel Wien Library Auditorium in Fairbanks.

Because of the dearth of information about iguanas in Alaska and the lack of natural sunshine, many Alaskan iguanas suffer severe calcium deficiencies. Our goal was to improve the quality of life for Alaskan iguanas and educate their owners. To our astonishment, over 110 people attended, including the media.

Over 40 iguana care packets were distributed. Each packet included a I.I.S. membership form.

Two veterinarians answered questions and club members gave presentations on the general care of the Green iguana. Jay Archer discussed the proper way to travel with iguanas, an important topic in Alaska, where people relocate in great numbers. I made a huge, vitamin rich iguana salad. The crowd was invited to take samples home to their iguanas. Attendees were surprised at the variety of fruits and vegetables I included.



Alaskan green iguana. Photograph: Taryn Merdes

After the Fair, we were pleased but somewhat concerned — perhaps the pet trade benefited more than iguana health. Our fears were allayed when we received many calls from worried iguana owners. Although many of these individuals bought an iguana after coming to our fair, they were earnest about providing an excellent home for their pets. Also, many owners with pet iguanas realized that their care methods needed improvement.

Enclosed are black and white photos of my iguana, Hearty. Hearty was left at a pet store by his former owners, where I adopted him.

I Enjoy your publication, *Iguana Times*, and am pleased to be a member of I.I.S.

*Best Regards*  
*Taryn L. Merdes*  
*Chair, Fairbanks Herpetocultural Society*



**Dear I.I.S.**

Thanks so much for sending a reply. I appreciate you for sending info for my iguana. She'll like me giving her the right needs. I'm sorry I can't join your membership. I'd like to help the West Indian rock iguanas, so I'm sending a dollar hoping to at least help a little. I don't want them dying out.

*Charlotte Urban*  
*San Antonio, Texas*

Charlotte was sent a reply and 2 issues of *Iguana Times*.  
*Editor*



*Continued on next page...*

### Open letter to I.I.S. members,

As a veterinarian dealing with diseases of captive and free-ranging herps on a regular basis, I feel compelled to comment on plans that are underway to release captive *Cyclura* spp. to bolster wild populations. I believe that introducing captive stock into wild populations is a bad idea for a number of reasons, including the potential for mixing gene pools and "genetic swamping" and the effects an influx of new, naive individuals could have on predator behavior.

My greatest concern, however, is the very real danger of introducing a disease into a vulnerable population, already depleted for other reasons. Our level of knowledge of infectious diseases affecting lizards, as well as other reptiles, is meager at best, as I'm sure other practitioners and pathologists will agree. There is no way that these captive animals can be examined or tested for the presence of all significant pathogens which may be carried to wild populations, because we don't know what those pathogens might be.

A case in point is the *Mycoplasma* infection of desert tortoises (*Gopherus agassizii*). Following decades of authorized and unauthorized release of captive desert tortoises into wild populations, an outbreak of upper respiratory disease was reported in tortoises from California, Nevada, and Utah. Mortality from the disease was high. In parts of California, 90% of the tortoises appeared to have died in a four year period (1988-1992). The severity of this disease prompted federal protection for the species and thereby generated funding for research. In 1992, the pathogen primarily responsible, a *Mycoplasma*, was isolated by a team of veterinary research scientists at the University of Florida. In this case, three years of intensive research, liberally funded by herp standards, was necessary to isolate a rather obscure but devastating pathogen. Unfortunately, desert tortoise populations in parts of the Mojave and Colorado Deserts may never recover. Although other factors may have contributed to tortoise mortality, such as drought and decreased forage availability, the high incidence of infected tortoises from known release localities provides compelling evidence that captive releases likely introduced this disease into the wild population.

Island species are noted for their geographic and genetic isolation; their vulnerability to pathogens and parasites of related mainland species has been well documented and is easily understandable. Host-parasite relationships evolve gradually and although a

virus, bacterium, or protozoan may be innocuous to its normal host, in a related but different host it may behave much differently. Although well intentioned, these captive release programs could well prove catastrophic.

Sincerely,  
James L. Jarchow, DVM

Periodically I hear proposals to introduce captive iguanas to suitable habitats unoccupied by surviving wild populations. While this strategy might appear sound, two significant risks come to mind:

1. For various reasons people aren't content to leave iguanas where they are put. Historically, numerous examples can be cited of iguanas being carried from place to place for food or pets. In most places it's impractical to monitor and control what people do, so even where captives are released in "remote" areas, the risks outlined by Dr. Jarchow are real.
2. Publicized reintroductions may divert public and political attention from the most critical issue: that of saving/restoring viable but endangered habitats and wild populations. It's virtually impossible to determine upfront whether introductions to satellite areas will offer long-term survival benefits for a species.

While captive stock may represent our last hope in the event that all else fails, I strongly feel that in most cases such introductions should be avoided.

— Thomas Wiewandt, Ph.D.

## REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS IN CAPTIVITY

BREEDING, LONGEVITY, & INVENTORY,  
CURRENT JANUARY 1, 1993.

521 pages

Compiled by Frank and Kate Slavens

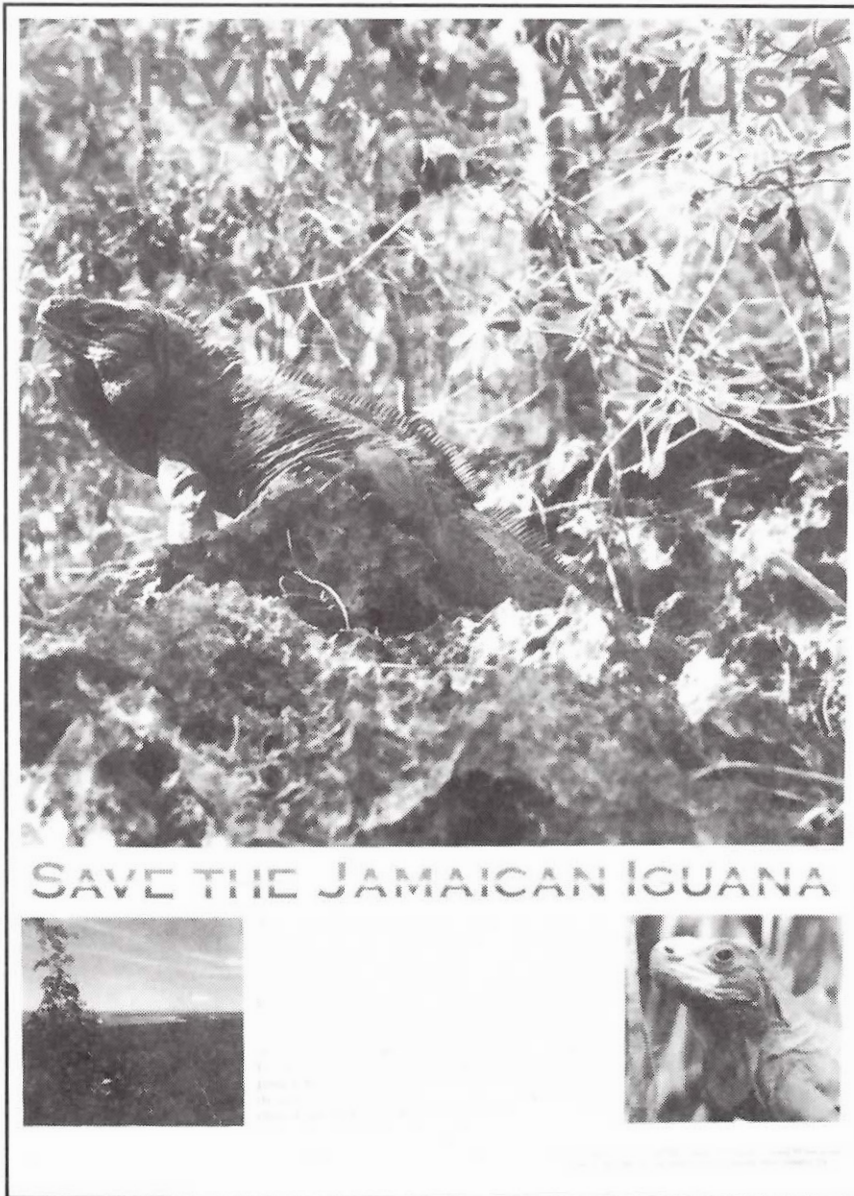


For more information contact: Frank L. Slavens, P.O. Box  
30744, Seattle, WA, 98103. or FAX 206 546 2912

Photo credit from last issue, page 20:

Jane Cagle and Armanda, Gretna, Louisiana

## Poster Commemorates Jamaican Iguana Survival



Fort Worth Zoo is offering a beautiful full color poster of the Jamaican Iguana, *Cyclura collei*, which was unveiled at the recent symposium and workshop on the conservation of the Jamaican Iguana.

The poster is being distributed in Jamaica to heighten public awareness for the plight of this critically endangered lizard. Once feared extinct, the Jamaican Iguana was rediscovered in 1990, and a small remnant population still clings to existence in the forests of the Hellshire hills.

Superb in color quality, this 17" x 22" poster features 3 photographs of the Jamaican Iguana and its habitat. A limited number of posters are available for \$10 each plus shipping & handling. Proceeds generated will directly support ongoing field research and conservation efforts in Jamaica. To order, please send check or money order for \$12.50 payable to: Fort Worth Zoological Association, Rick Hudson, Reptile Dept., Fort Worth Zoo, 1989 Colonial Parkway, Fort Worth, TX 76110

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### Wanted:

***I.I.S. members willing to assist the staff of Iguana Times.***

Members with typing skills and a personal computer (*any kind*) are needed to help keyboard stories from supplied manuscript for use in future issues of *Iguana Times*.

If interested, please contact **Mike Ripca** at (610) 626-1988 for more information.