

# GREEN IGUANAS ARE SOCIAL BEINGS

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**T**he green iguana is a marvelous being. He is a reptile; a lizard, and a wild animal. He looks something like a dinosaur. He has elaborate head gear: ornamental scales, a flag of skin at his throat, and a crest of spines that runs from neck to tail. As a hatchling he is bright green. With maturity, dark bands may appear on his body, and his colors may change to darker green, olive, orange, blue, or a combination of these. He will grow from 12-18 inches (30-46 cm), excluding his long tail, in 2-3 years. His size, beauty, and gentle nature make him wonderful to hold. *Iguana iguana*

is one of the most popular pets today. With his exotic, vital presence, he brings a bit of his home, the tropical rain forest, into ours. And he is a memento of a shrinking wilderness.

"During 1992, more than 300,000 live green iguanas were items of commerce."<sup>1</sup> By 1995, that number had more than doubled: "With imports to the US exceeding 700,000 per year, the pressure on wild populations has become an issue of concern. Furthermore, a high percentage of these lizards are believed to die within the first year."<sup>2</sup>

How sad, and surprising for such a fascinating, popular animal. And how unfortunate for the many people whose new pet iguanas die. Why, beyond his appearance and good nature, has the iguana become so popular in recent years? We have separated ourselves from all but the most domesticated creatures, and as we grow more distant from nature, we look for more vestiges of it. Though he will be a pet, the iguana remains a wild animal; a link to the natural world. For a lot of people, especially children, a rapport with a wild animal is a thing that is wished for, even craved. Many of us find a connection to nature in the pet iguana, while others purchase iguanas, but do not

**"Moreover, the correct name of this handsome green creature is *Iguana iguana*, Family Iguanidae. He is obviously from a proud race."**

Gordon Burghardt  
*Iguanas of the World*

build a rapport enabling that connection to exist. In the latter case, the keeper may not understand why the pet iguana became a disappointment. With several fine care books, reptile husbandry magazines, and green iguana care videos available, these lizards are still not understood. Iguana husbandry isn't difficult. But knowing about practical care is only part of keeping iguanas. We have much to discover about "who" they are. We must look at our iguanas, as well as the books.

A good place to start in looking at iguanas is to value them, and what they can teach us about life

other than human. Because iguanas are "cold-blooded", or ectothermic (relying on their environment for body temperature), a lot of human beings assume a cold-dumbness about them. A surprising number of people believe iguanas are perfectly wonderful unconscious, unfeeling creatures with few more sensibilities than bugs. Such misperceptions block our understanding of iguanas, and what they need as pets. These lizards are cognizant vertebrates with fully developed central nervous systems. They can experience fear, discomfort, and in captivity, boredom or depression. Iguanas who "lie there and do nothing" are unhealthy, or depressed. Iguanas will spend time basking or digesting a meal, but that is just part of iguana life.

Green iguanas are social beings. They possess ornamental scales, colors, and elaborate head and body language: "Sixty-nine elementary postures and movements of head, eyes, jaws, tongue, appendages, trunk, limbs and tail are distinguished, as well as fifty-two more complex or integrated behavioral elements...The behavioral inventory as described in the present investigation is by no means complete."<sup>3</sup> In the wild, iguanas

do not amble around randomly, but live in communities. They see each other's colors and gestures for they have excellent vision. What is an isolated, captive iguana to do with his language and showy scales? If he bobs his head, who answers? His human keeper can answer. If a single iguana is desired for a pet, the keeper needs to spend time with that lizard, because captive iguanas need things to do. They need a life; a routine of activity. Activities can include warm water baths for exercise and cleansing, basking or exercising time out of the cage, hand feeding, and just being with the iguana. Iguanas raised alone are generally even-tempered, less active, and easier to manage. Routine maintenance is minimal, but again, the lizard cannot be left alone, day after day, with nothing to do or an apathetic pet results. It is not uncommon for a new iguana keeper to dispose of an iguana who has failed to be an exciting pet.

When iguanas are raised in pairs or groups, their lives are more complete; their social behavior fascinating. Some care information suggests that iguanas do not get along with each other and so, should be kept apart. Indeed, iguana husbandry becomes more complicated with the size of a group. One learns that mature males will fight over territory; that females may fight over males, and select nesting sites. In the presence of a male, a female will probably develop eggs, whether fertilized or not. Gravid (pregnant) iguanas require extra attention. Larger iguanas will displace smaller ones from choice basking sites. Etcetera. So the more iguanas one has, the more work one has. But one gets to know green iguanas as green iguanas.

The survival statistics for captive iguanas are grim, but more and more people are getting to know these wonderful lizards. Anecdotes about iguanas becoming beloved family members, classroom mascots, and long-term companions who return their owner's affection are popping up in newspapers and magazines with greater frequency.

How does one have the best experience with iguana keeping? Realize the commitment involved before acquiring pet iguanas. Care for your pet, or pets. Like any living being, warm or cold blooded, iguanas need a comfortable environment. They can and should live for 10–20 years. They are large, tropical animals with sim-

ple, but specific care requirements. Read all you can about green iguana care and behavior. And look at each lizard. Not only will you learn about a fascinating animal, it's fun.

The following husbandry basics are offered: 1) temperature/ light control, 2) complete nutrition 3) psychological comfort. Night and day temperatures may range between 65°F–85°F. Several hours daily of temperatures in the 90°F range must be provided for proper digestion, development and growth. Iguanas regulate their body temperature by behavior, so a temperature gradient within an enclosure is needed. They must be able to move close to or away from a heat source. Unfiltered sunlight (not passing through glass or plastic) is part of an iguana's health requirements. Where and when sunshine is unavailable, Vitalite® (not Grolite®) is an acceptable substitute. Nutritious foods include greens like dandelion, mustard, collard, turnip, chard, arugula, and kale; vegetables such as carrot, sweet potato, pumpkin, beans and peas; plus fruit items like papaya, apple, pear, plum, blueberries and mango. Captive animals need refuge from constant scrutiny. Provide a hiding box for privacy, provide adequate space for each lizard, and handle your pet or pets gently.



#### For information about iguanas, or their captive care:

*Iguana Times*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (September, 1995). The Journal of the International Iguana Society has an excellent, concise care outline. Becoming an IIS member supports environmental and educational activities on behalf of iguanid genera, and their habitats.

*Iguanas: A Guide to Their Biology and Captive Care*. Fredric L. Frye, B.Sc., D.V.M., M.Sc., CBiol, FIBiol and Wendy Townsend. Krieger Publishing, Malabar, FL.

*The Green Iguana Manual*. Philippe de Vosjoli. Advanced Vivarium Systems, Lakeside CA.

#### Literature Cited

1. *Iguana Times*, The Journal of the International Iguana Society Inc., Vol. 2, No. 4 (December 1993).
2. *Iguana Times*, The Journal of the International Iguana Society Inc., Vol. 4, No. 1 (March 1995).
3. "The Behavioral Inventory of the Green Iguana", Hansjurgen Distel and J. Veazy; *Iguanas of the World: Their Behavior, Ecology and Conservation*. Noyes Publishing, Park Ridge, NJ