

# A Delicate Situation

## *Iguana delicatissima* at the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust

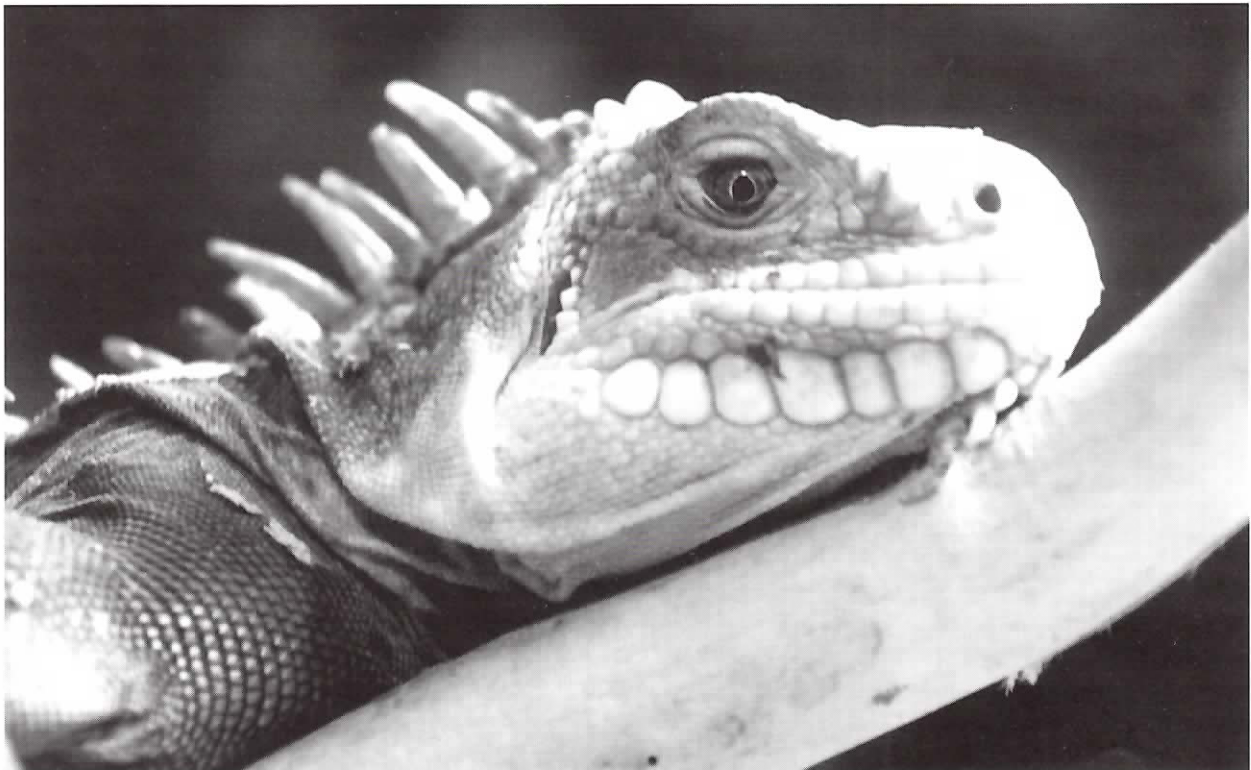
John Bendon

For the first time ever, in captivity, a pair of *Iguana delicatissima*, aged about six years, have bred and produced one live young. To those in the know, this is an extremely significant event. *Iguana delicatissima* are notoriously difficult to keep in captivity. This species comes from the Antilles and is not of the same mental attitude as the common green iguana. Specimens are held in zoos at Memphis and San Diego where both have had no luck in breeding.

The Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust (located on Jersey, one of the Channel Islands, off the coast of France) was set up in 1963 by Gerald Durrell as a unique center for the breeding of rare and endangered species in captivity. The trust is now the center of a worldwide organization, with two major supporting associates, W.P.T. International in the U.S.A. and W.P.T. Canada, that are united in the common goal of preserving endangered wildlife through carefully controlled breed-

ing programs, promoting field work and research into the species' requirements in the wild, discussing and negotiating with governments to protect and conserve these species in the wild, and communicating their work through public and professional education programs to a wider audience around the world.

The pair of iguanas live in a large cage about 8 ft (2½ m) by 16 ft (5m) by 10 ft (3m) high, the environment being as close to their home as possible with correct temperature and humidity settings and correct periods of light and heat. They are cared for by curator of reptiles Richard Gibson who is there all day every day. The clutch of about ten eggs quickly deteriorated and eventually only one egg produced a live animal. This creature is exactly like a hatchling green iguana except for the lower jaw line which has a row of large, white scales along it as opposed to one large scale in greens. The hatchling is being reared in a 3 foot



Six year-old female, *Iguana delicatissima*, at the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust. Photograph: John Bendon



Six year-old male, *Iguana delicatissima*, at the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust. Photograph: John Bendon

cube of a cage which has been decked out forest-style. Unfortunately, it refuses to eat and is being given baby food and vitamins through a tube. It is extremely nervous and Mr. Gibson is concerned for its survival. It is weighed every day and given D<sub>3</sub> supplements according to the details worked out by Mr. Roger Lamb of Birmingham, England. Due to the set up at the zoo, neither parents have access to direct sunlight and it was advised to put the little baby lizard out in the sun every day for a time. It is hoped that the sunlight will stimulate the creature into behaving more naturally and to begin eating on its own. All the iguana diets in the zoo are herbivore.

*Delicatissima* are somewhat of an anomaly at the moment. There is discussion about them being descended from green iguanas and them being the ancestors of rock iguanas (*Cyclura*). According to Richard Gibson, recent DNA studies show that, if anything, it is the other way around. The mitochondrial DNA shows that *Cyclura* existed before *Iguana*. Because *delicatissima* habitat is between the two others it is assumed that it is a *Cyclura* in the process of changing and becoming *Iguana*,

but this has not yet been proven. *Cyclura* have a 'toe-comb' on the fourth toe of each back foot. Both species of iguana have none. More studies of evolutionary relationships are being done but it will be a long time before the truth is known.

These animals are listed by the I.U.C.N. as endangered. Stories of green iguanas being let loose in the habitat of the Antillean iguana, to breed together producing a hybrid and mixing up the gene pool, are rife. This must be stopped immediately. The Antilles is the only home for *delicatissima* whereas the greens number in the hundreds of thousands and live from central Mexico all the way down through Central America and beyond. More knowledge is needed so that they may be bred successfully. Specialist captive breeding programs can be instigated where the resulting offspring can indeed be returned to the wild without fear of them infecting the existing wild population. This *will* come in time, but will it *be* in time?

Anyone interested in the work of the trust may become a member by sending £20 in British funds to: The Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust, Trinity, Jersey, Channel Islands. 