LIZARD LETTERS

Dear Editor,

This is my response to the video review of "The Captive Care of The Green Iguana" reviewed by Shawn Fry, Scott Delay and William Hayes. I refer to the unjust comments made concerning myself, Roger Lamb, and my section on breeding which they found highly amusing. I quite assure them that anyone who is interested, or has had problems in getting iguanas to breed and lay without leaving the female in need of veterinary care, would not find it amusing, nor is it intended to be. It is meant to be of help! (1) Firstly the comment "it's so easy and simple" must be in another video, as the statement I made said that "Iguanas aren't difficult to breed in captivity providing the right conditions are met." (2) The "elaborate egg laying chamber" referred to is made from Melamine, purchased from a local hardware store and screwed together, with a plant trough acting as the egg chamber entrance, being simple to make and requiring little intelligence to build. (3) The "sophisticated incubator" is a fish-transporting, polystyrene box with a simple thermostat and some external temperature probes. I think this "sophisticated incubator" has been used by most herpetologists for many years and is not only effective but is cheap and simple to make. (4) I am also interested to know how these simply designed items can "be greatly simplified," yet work effectively? I await your comments. The egg laying chamber was designed as simply as possible, yet made to the satisfaction of the female iguana to hopefully reduce any extra stress made upon her. (5) It is common knowledge (and also now stated in most iguana books), to anyone who knows anything about green iguanas, that a male iguana can express an interest in, and have on occasions attacked, female humans—most notably around their menstrual cycle—common knowledge to any one, that is, but you, the reviewers. (6) The photoperiod was only mentioned by me as I think it is one of the main factors we can vary in captivity indoors. I don't have any rain clouds in my enclosures and make do with spraying my iguanas daily. I personally have had no requirement, or cause to create, a constant high humidity which would not only affect my iguanas, but would also rot away my enclosures and house in the process. Other than slightly lower night and day temperatures during the British winter period I have no requirement to alter my temperature settings or to my knowledge has it ever affected the mating process by altering the temperature or humidity to date. My second generation iguanas are very healthy, thank you. (7) Yes, the eggs probably do appear somewhat dehydrated. That's because they were old iguana eggs filled with sand—this part of the video was only an example how the eggs are laid in the simple egg laying chamber. Although I have plenty of video footage of eggs just laid, the film quality was not good enough to be used in the video.

As you have probably gathered I am not amused by the negative and unprofessional approach you gave my particular chapter on breeding. On this point if I have offended you, then good, as you offended me. The next time you review a video I suggest you understand something about the subject you are reviewing. To the Directors and staff (excluding William Hayes) I am sorry to have had to respond in this manner, but I needed to address the facts, as anyone intending on buying the video may not take the breeding side seriously.

I first began attempting to breed common green iguanas in 1989. My first success was in 1992 and I have hatched 116 first generation green iguanas up to 1995. I then concentrated my efforts on breeding my first generation iguanas. I have bred a total of 29 second generation iguanas up to 1996 and now only have one pair left, as I am concentrating my efforts on breeding other species of iguana. I have accumulated 8 years of common green iguana data from the iguanas I first owned and ones I have since bred, such as daily records breeding charts, weight and lengths etc.

I do not consider myself proficient to have bred green iguanas, and believe what experience I have gained to be on the first rung of a ladder. As time goes on, and more knowledge is gained by iguana owners, those who are serious about breeding these fantastic creatures will be able to supply those who are serious about looking after them. It is in part for this reason that I have stopped breeding green iguanas. After all the hours and effort spent by my understanding wife, Tracey, and me to produce second generation offspring, I found myself selling them at the trade price of wild caught and captive farmed iguanas. I realized that most people wishing to own a green iguana neither bothered, nor cared, where it came from, but only how cheap they could purchase one. I feel these people do not deserve to own an iguana. Iguanas are for life and not just for Christmas!

Roger Lamb

Editor's Note: Roger Lamb is a longtime I.I.S. member in England and Great Britain's most accomplished iguana breeder. (This letter was edited for clarity and length.)

The video may be purchased for $12.95 + tax and shipping (U.S.) from Pet Warehouse at 1-800-443-1160.

LIZARD LETTERS

Dear Editor,

Having read "Mayaguana Blues" by John Bendon, I am pleased to learn that apparently healthy numbers of *Cyclura carinata bartschi* remain on the only cay they exist on today. However, there were some misleading comments made by the author regarding gravid females, which he believed he had seen. Given what we know about the reproductive biology of *Cyclura* and John Iverson's studies of *C. carinata* in particular, it is highly unlikely that any gravid females were seen during Bendon's visit to Mayaguana during the month of March. Mating activities should not begin until well into April, and females should not have extended abdomens until later in May. From my own experience studying *C. rileyi* in the Bahamas, even late term gravid females are difficult enough to recognize by palpation, much less by visual cues.

I should also point out that the apparent health of an iguana population based on a brief visit may be misleading. For example, an undetected predator or disease may cause problems that a simple population survey might not reveal. During a 1996 visit to Sandy Cay, the only remaining home of *C. r. cristata,* we saw dozens of iguanas during the first few hours. On the third day, however, we located raccoon footprints—probably those of some ignorant fool's castaway pet.

Several rats were also seen about the camp at night. After returning in 1997, numbers of iguanas were dramatically reduced, and remains of adults were even seen in raccoon feces. From detailed surveys we estimated that between 130 and 180 individuals remain on Sandy Cay, far fewer than Iverson had estimated during his visit in 1980. Worse yet, our capture data clearly indicated that females are substantially underrepresented, with as few as 10 adult females remaining. With such a skewed sex ratio, the functional population size is critically small! Of five adult females with radio transmitters installed, two were killed within a few weeks by the raccoon, which has eluded all efforts to trap it but will soon be removed by other means. Thus, as encouraging as Bendon's observations are for *C. c. bartschi,* we must take little comfort in leaving things as they are and support immediate research to determine the true nature of its status.

Sincerely,
William K. Hayes, Ph.D.
Loma Linda University

Editor's Reply:

Although Dr. Hayes is correct, concluding that John Bendon's visit to Booby Cay was before the breeding season of *Cyclura carinata bartschi* by several weeks, (based on the studies of Dr. John Iverson of the closely related *Cyclura carinata carinata*), the photograph accompanying the article does indeed appear to be that of a gravid female. John saw two other large females in similar condition.

Iguanas can retain sperm from a previous breeding season and produce fertile eggs during the following breeding season without insemination by a male. We know of a case involving a female *Cyclura nubila,* whose mate was removed from her cage in March, 1994, before he had an opportunity to mate with her. In July of that year she laid seven eggs, three of which hatched in October. Apparently, her eggs were fertilized by sperm from the 1993 mating season.

We discourage the palpation of late term gravid female iguanas. We recommend against any handling of gravid females, especially endangered ones. Healthy female iguanas are especially vulnerable to mortality from stress and dehydration in the period before egg laying. In a population of iguanas with one or more unnatural predators or competitors this danger is greatly amplified.

Whenever an ecological emergency occurs in a small island system, measures taken to control that emergency should pre-empt all other activities.

John Bendon's observations on Booby Cay are encouraging. They suggest that the population of *C. c. bartschi* is stable and healthy. However, the occupation of the cay by goats can potentially have an adverse affect on the vegetation that is vital to the survival of the iguanas.

Steps that need to be implemented are: 1) Trapping to verify that rats are not present on Booby cay. 2) Constructing a corral or enclosure on Mayaguana for the goats (as suggested by John) to ensure their permanent removal from Booby Cay.

Sometimes leaving well enough alone is an excellent course of action. Preservation of habitat is the best way to ensure that a species survives until the time when we can study and learn from it. Iguanas have survived on the West Indian islands for tens of millions of years before we came along. The only way they will survive is if we allow them their space.

Robert W. Ehrig
I.I.S. President