

# LIZARD LETTERS

June 15, 1998

**The Honorable Bob Miller**  
 Governor of Nevada  
 State Capitol Bldg.  
 Carson City, NV 89701

Dear Governor Miller,

I am writing to you to express my deep concerns about the commercial trade in live reptiles allowed by the state of Nevada. I was recently asked to review proposed CITES II listings for several species of desert lizards. Included with the review material were the commercial harvest numbers for Nevada lizards and snakes for the years 1986 to the first half of 1995. The numbers collected for some popular, pet-trade species, such as collared lizards, desert iguanas, desert horned lizards ("horned toads") and chuckwallas, are staggering. I have attached a copy of the commercial report with my letter.

The trade in Nevada reptiles raises both ethical and ecological concerns. Some species are especially vulnerable to depletion from large-scale collecting because of their life history characteristics (slow to mature, long adult life, and low recruitment levels) and/or the ease with which they are collected. Therefore, it is quite likely that current levels of harvest are not sustainable for some of the listed species. Moreover, scientific studies were not carried out beforehand to determine what level of harvest could be tolerated by each species, nor did the Nevada Division of Wildlife (NDW) establish bag limits, age/gender restrictions, or limited seasons for commercial take. Thus, the current trade is essentially an unregulated enterprise, and without scientific basis.

The NDW advocates the "consumptive uses" of wildlife, but it can be argued that the commercial trade in live reptiles is more than consumption; it is grossly wasteful, resulting in high levels of mortality, and placing species in jeopardy. We should question not only the ethics, but also the wisdom (from the standpoint of conservation principles and sustainable economy) of allowing this trade to proceed unregulated. Wildlife is for the enjoyment of everyone, but many people will be denied the opportunity to study, photograph, or simply observe these creatures in nature if commercial dealers continue their activities unabated. In an era of heightened environmental awareness and concern for protecting biodiversity, the trade in wild-caught Nevada reptiles is senseless, deplorable and anachronistic.

The commercialization of reptiles in Nevada has also created law enforcement problems for the adjoining states of Arizona, California, and Utah where commercial collecting is prohibited. As the numbers of reptiles decline in southern Nevada (where about 30 dealers now operate), the temptation increases to make illegal forays into the adjoining states to obtain animals. Desert iguanas, collared lizards, horned lizards and chuckwallas in the northern Mojave Desert of California look like Nevada animals and are therefore easily "laundered" through Nevada dealers. Several cases have already come to light where color phases of species known to occur only in California or Arizona (e.g. red-back or red-tail color phases of chuckwallas) were claimed by unscrupulous collectors to originate from Nevada, whereas clearly they did not.

While I believe that people should be allowed to keep native reptiles as pets, there are other ways to provide them with animals which minimize the impact on natural populations, namely, commercial captive breeding, or by issuing state permits to allow individuals to collect their own pet lizard or snake. Commercial breeders of reptiles could provide many of the desired kinds for the pet industry, but unfortunately they cannot compete with dealers supplying cheap, wild-caught specimens from Nevada. The reptiles coming out of Nevada are usually sold in volume to national retail pet store chains. The vast majority of these reptiles are never purchased by individuals, but die a slow death from starvation or disease in an air-conditioned store. I have observed this scenario time and again.

In my view, commercialization of Nevada reptiles is an unethical and potentially detrimental activity that must come to an end. The Nevada Division of Wildlife should adopt collecting regulations similar to those of Arizona and California. Such regulations, for the most part, do not deny people the right to keep native reptiles as pets, but they ensure that wildlife, as a renewable resource, will be used wisely so that future generations of Americans can enjoy them. I hope that you share my views and that you will encourage the Nevada Division of Wildlife, through its Board of Wildlife Commissioners, to make appropriate changes in their regulations that will safeguard America's wildlife heritage. Thank you for your time and consideration.

*Sincerely,*  
 Richard R. Montanucci  
 Associate Professor of Biology

## Commercial Collection of Reptiles in Nevada\* 1986-1995

Common Name	Scientific Name	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995**	Total
Desert Iguana	<i>Dipsosaurus dorsalis</i>	619	1473	1705	1629	2337	9158
Chuckwalla	<i>Sauromalus obesus</i>	113	482	303	1351	1337	3805

\* Based on Monthly Commercial Collection Reports prepared by permitted collectors and provided to the Nevada Division of Wildlife.

\*\*January-June 1995

## LIZARD LETTERS

June 13, 1998

Dear Editors,

Issues of *Iguana Times* continue to be excellent. The natural history articles, research papers, and observational studies of wild iguana behavior are all very fine. Of special interest are the "Youth in Science" articles which give hope for the future of education and conservation. And of course, the photographs are fantastic!

One of my favorite pieces is the one about Tee Beau (Vol. 4, #1): "Living with Tee Beau: Sharing Your Life and Home with a 26-year-old Rhino Iguana." Another favorite is John Bendon's story about Pinkie, from "Lizard Letters" (Vol. 3, #1?): "The Beast of Andros—My Two Years Cohabitation with a Cycluran iguana." Both pieces are engaging, and a great pleasure to read. With beautiful detail, they show the character of individual, captive iguanas, and of particular importance they show what the iguanas mean to their keepers: Tee Beau's keeper Monty says "I don't believe that I could have accomplished what I have without the companionship of a half-hateful iguana named Tee Beau." And Bendon writes of his "Caribbean friend" Pinkie "...I feel that however much I did for him, he gave me much more than I ever gave him." These pieces each get the reader caring about the iguanas partly by showing their charming—if moody—behavior; their unique and endearing "lizardly ways." They reveal a rapport between human and iguana. I showed the story of Pinkie to a friend who remarked "I never thought of an iguana as a pet you could love." While that may be a sappy statement to a Ph.D. in iguanine biology, there are a lot of people who aren't Ph.D.s; who aren't going to appreciate iguanas as objects of study. Perhaps instead they could be encouraged to view iguanas as equally worthy of affection—and so, protection—as pandas, lions, whales, bluebirds, baby seals, dolphins, zebras.

On that note, I propose that *Iguana Times* editors consider delegating a regular feature for "anecdotes": observational/experiential "true stories" of living with pet iguanas—greens, chuckawallas, *Cyclurus* spp., etc. That way, the science articles and papers can be separated from the anecdotes. I bet a lot of iguana keepers would send in very readable, moving stories about their beloved pets. (Ouch!) If space is limited, the features could be kept to 500 words or less, and include one "snapshot."

Thanks—and thanks again for *Iguana Times*

Sincerely,  
Wendy Townsend

## IGUANA NEWSBRIEFS

### Delicatissima Stamps Issued on Anguilla

Anguilla's sparse wildlife (fauna) population has been expanded in recent years with the re-emergence of the illusive *Iguana delicatissima*.

The Island's appointed custodian of its Marine, fauna, flora, and historical heritage, the Anguilla National Trust, has spearheaded a thrust to ensure the propagation of the iguana.

It is in promotion of this interest that the Anguilla General Post Office has issued a set of four postage stamps to assist in making the public aware of the importance of protecting this endangered reptile.

The stamp issue endorsed by the "World Wildlife Fund for Nature" (WWF) depicts the *Iguana delicatissima* in four environment settings and the artist's interpretation of the subject is strikingly realistic.

Iguanas were historically abundant on every island from Anguilla to Martinique. Over the years this situation has changed dramatically due to loss of forest, hunting for food and as well the impact of predators such as dogs, mongoose, cats, and grazers like goats who compete for food and damage the forest.

As a result of these pressures, the Lesser Antillean iguanas are threatened with extinction across their range and many islands such as St. Kitts, Nevis and Antigua no longer have iguanas.

On Anguilla the small iguana population inhabits a relatively small section of the northern coast living in rock crevices. The reptiles

feed mainly on shrubs such as Chink, Cattle Tongue, Mutton Polly, Antigua Balsam and White Cedar.

To enhance the chances for juvenile survival, the Anguilla National Trust is considering captive breeding of the *Iguana delicatissima*, a move which would significantly help to ensure the survival of this endangered species.



Source: <http://web.ai/stamps/iguana.html>