

# A Day at the Zoo

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“**Y**ou mustn’t speak to the animals or they won’t take you seriously. These people are scientists working with critically endangered species.” I was having this conversation with my dear friend and house guest at the time, John Bendon. John has been working with both the International Iguana Society and the West Indian Iguana Specialist Group for many years, and is well acquainted with the scientists working at the San Diego Zoo. My husband was attending a medical conference in San Diego and John had set up appointments for me to meet some important people and some important animals at the Zoo and the affiliated Centre for Reproduction of Endangered Species (CRES). Like many of our readers, I knew only about species such as *Iguana delicatissima*, *Cyclura pinguis*, and *Brachylophus fasciatus* from the pages

of *Iguana Times* and other reptile publications, and this was my best and probably only chance of ever seeing live specimens.

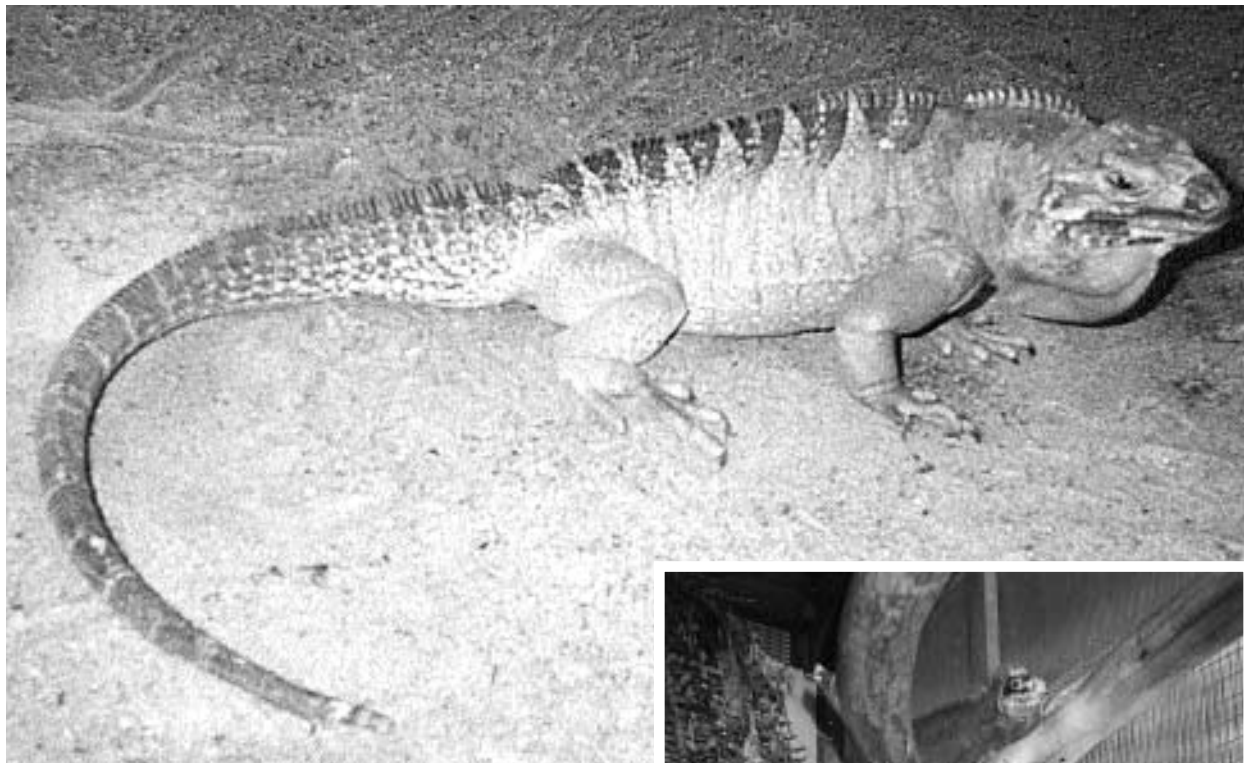
I was determined to appear as “serious” as possible, so I went rifling through back issues and unearthed articles on all of the above species. None of the material was unfamiliar to me because I’ve been teaching students, from preschoolers to university-level, about iguanas and conservation for years. Still, I was certain that I would somehow manage to embarrass myself.

Between the Zoo and the Wild Animal Park, I spent my first four days in San Diego admiring all kinds of remarkable animals, wonderful exhibits, and excellent presentations, and reading about the exciting work being done with the pandas, California condors, and other endangered species. As awe-inspiring as the whole experience was, I

was saddened to see people persistently misunderstanding animals that were different in any way. I recall the family (mother, father, and child) watching three magnificent condors that were perched together on a rock. They were picking at each other and the child thought they were fighting. The father started egging them on and the mother pulled her family away from the “disgusting” display. I had to stop myself from shouting at them. Couldn’t they see that this was a mother, father, and a juvenile that were grooming



Jeff Lemm of the San Diego Zoo holding a large Cuban iguana (*Cyclura nubila nubila*).  
Photograph: Steve Steward



Above: A large Jamaican iguana (*Cyclura collei*).  
 Right: Male and female *Iguana delicatissima*.  
 Photographs: Jeff Lemm



each other and enjoying a lovely afternoon on their rock? How much more do people fail to identify with the plight of the reptiles?

By the day of my appointments most of the gloom had vanished, but I was still a little apprehensive about appearing sufficiently “serious.” At the CRES, I was met by Jeff Lemm, the Research Animal Coordinator. Jeff struck me immediately as someone who took great pride in his work and cared very deeply for the animals. I suspect he also has had plenty of experience entertaining goofy visitors, because he made me feel quite welcome as he introduced the animals and let me know which ones I could hug and which were being kept with as little human contact as possible in order to encourage breeding.

I was first introduced to three substantial white-throated monitors that are used in behavioral experiments. Then I had the pleasure of observing Ruby, a beautiful Komodo dragon, being fed her lunch of specially prepared “dragon meatballs.” Ruby was quite intent on her meal and didn’t seem the least bit troubled by anyone’s boots.

Subsequently, I got to meet the iguanas. Gitmo the Cuban iguana (*Cyclura nubila nubila*) has had his handsome face featured on *Reptiles* magazine. At 15 years of age and an impressive 17 pounds, he is a relaxed and charming spokesiguana originally from Guantanamo Bay. The Cuban iguanas of Guantanamo Bay were one of the first populations studied by CRES scientists to test conservation strategies such as headstarting and captive breeding. Information collected from this con-

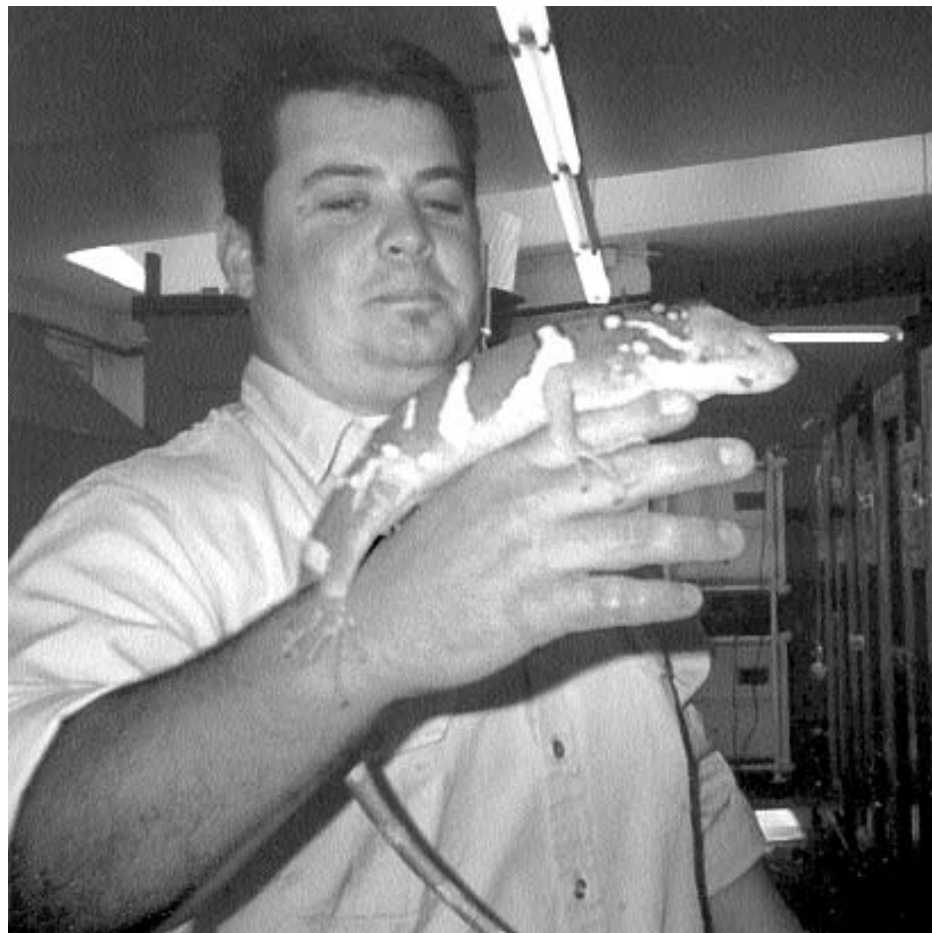
tinuing study has proven invaluable in assisting other endangered species of *Cyclura*.

The story of the Jamaican Iguana, *Cyclura collei*, has been well documented in the pages of *Iguana Times* since their rediscovery in 1990 after supposed extinction to the successful headstart program at the Hope Zoo in Kingston. Most recently, I recall an article about the neoprene vests produced by Nike to hold the radiotransmitters for tracking the headstarted iguanas. Even these high-tech vests have proven inadequate over time. A new strategy involving surgically implanting the transmitters has been tested and shown not to impair egg laying or mobility in captive-held Cuban iguanas. Three pairs of *C. collei* have been at CRES since 1992, including the youngest in any US zoo. One of the females nested successfully in this, her first lay year, although her nine eggs were infertile. Still, this was an important first step and definitely cause for optimism. Even though I know that the orange coloration typical of Jamaican iguanas photographed in the wild is caused by the high iron content in the soil of their native habitat, I thought it odd to see “clean” *C. collei* sporting the usual attractive *Cyclura* striping.

The Anegada or “Stout” iguana, *Cyclura pinguis*, has been a particular favorite of mine since reading an article by James Lazell in *Iguana Times* in 1997. This animal, Lazell writes, is described in local folklore as attaining “weights of more than 60 pounds and lengths over 6 feet.” The species varies in a number of ways from other members of the genus *Cyclura*. Most significantly, it lacks rings of enlarged cau-

dal scales, a defining featuring of “*Cyclura*,” which literally means, “ring tail.” Both the teeth and the skull bones also differ from those of other species, and the young *C. pinguis*, although displaying the usual striped patterning of young rock iguanas are various shades of green and become very dark, almost black as they mature. Some researchers have speculated that *C. pinguis* may be the stem population from which all the other species of *Cyclura* are descended.

At one point, fewer than 200 *C. pinguis* were thought to remain in the wild. Only isolated populations survived the hunting of previous centuries, and the remaining animals have had to contend with development and competition from feral livestock. Translocated populations on Guana and Neckar islands have experienced some success, but CRES has concentrated its efforts on a headstart program on Anegada, with already 50 animals being raised for eventual release.



John Kinkaid of the San Diego Zoo holds a Fijian banded iguana (*Brachylophus fasciatus*).  
Photograph: AJ Gutman

CRES has housed three pairs of Stout Iguanas since the fall of 2000. These animals had been legally purchased and in the possession of a private breeder for ten years before coming to the zoo. I was impressed by their dark, glowering looks, but I suppose I was expecting them to be bigger than they were. Jeff was overwhelmingly skeptical about the 6 foot-60 pound iguana story, claiming the largest he had worked with was only a little over 1 m long and about 6–7 kg. Personally, I like the idea too much to abandon it just because the really big one has so far managed to elude everyone.


*Iguana delicatissima* is another remarkable species. It is the only other member of the genus *Iguana* beside the green iguana. It is somewhat smaller than its closest relative. Juveniles are bright green, but the adults become predominantly grey with the males acquiring pink highlights in the mating season. Wild populations of *I. delicatissima* face the usual obstacles caused by introduced predators, habitat destruction, and fragmentation of populations, but they also are faced with competition from and hybridization with green iguanas. *Iguana delicatissima* produces clutches that are intermediate in size between those of green iguanas and species of *Cyclura*. Eggs also are intermediate in size. Only seven animals are in captivity in only three institutions in the world. The pair at the Jersey Wildlife Trust have bred successfully (see report in *Iguana Times* 8(4)) but two eggs from a successful mating this year in San Diego failed to hatch.

I could have spent days at CRES, marveling at all the animals and asking a million questions, but I had only five minutes to run over to the zoo for my next appointment at the Reptile House. I was only a little sweaty and no more disheveled than usual by the time I arrived, struggling to regain my “serious” demeanor.

Again, I was in for a big treat. John Kinkaid, the Animal Care Manager, was clearly as enthusiastic about his animals as I was. “What have you seen so far? You can take out any of the Banded iguanas if you want to photograph them. Is there anything else you’d like to see?” John spent the next 2 ½ hours showing me all of his charges. I saw long-necked tree monitors and endless species of both rare and common snakes. I held young blue-tongued skinks that looked like fat sausages and was loath to disturb the young *Corucia* who

climbed on top of my head to nest in my hair. As a long-time dinosaur admirer, I had known about the remarkable tuatara long before I developed an interest in reptiles. The tuatara (genus *Sphenodon*) is a lizard-like creature that has been around since dinosaurs roamed the earth and it has no other surviving relatives. Few of them, however, exist today. The tuataras at the San Diego Zoo are members of the highly endangered Brothers Island population (*S. guentheri*) and are the only ones kept anywhere outside of New Zealand. We went outside to meet the Galápagos Tortoises; John knew them all by name and knew which individuals were grumpy and which would come galloping over to take the sweet potatoes we brought as treats.

My favorites, of course, were the Fijian Banded Iguanas, tiny, brilliantly colored creatures with alert eyes and calm temperaments. I particularly enjoyed holding the babies and a three-legged female who had lost a limb to infection. I was a little surprised to learn that her name was Ilene (I lean) and it left me wondering whether the *I. delicatissima* were named Hors d’oeuvre and Entrée (John has promised to let me name some of the next *Brachylophus* babies that hatch).

For days, even after returning home, I could still close my eyes and see so many beautiful faces, sense the weight of plump, healthy bodies, and feel wonderfully textured skin. Although much work remains to preserve all of the endangered animals of the world, we can only applaud the work being done on behalf of the reptiles by the dedicated staff at the San Diego Zoo. 

## References

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**Ed. Note:** The *Cyclura pinguis* housed at CRES laid eggs in July 2001. After 90 days incubation at 30° C, four hatchlings emerged. This represents the first captive breeding of this species in a zoological facility.